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ON THE GOLD-PATH IN '49

ADAPTED FROM THE FRENCH OF

ALFRED DE BRÉHAT

BY

A. ESTOCLET

TRANSLATOR OF JULES VERNE'S CÉSAR CASCABEL, ETC., ETC.

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BRAS D'ACIER,

OR

ON THE GOLD-PATH IN '49.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

ENTER THE CHIEF ACTORS OF THE PLAY.

IT was in 1849; November was drawing to its close. The rainy season temporarily drove the gold-seekers from the placers, and they were flocking to San Francisco.

Although considerably enlarged during the two years that had just elapsed, San Francisco contained no more than 5000 or 6000 houses yet, and at most some 30,000 inhabitants. This population was daily swelled by crowds of strangers pouring in from every quarter of the globe; and despite the number of tents and wooden structures which sprang up, as if by enchantment, around the few brick or stone houses, lodging accommodations could be found with great difficulty.

Such hotels as were to be met with—single-storied, like the other houses in the town—were quite full. Few indeed were the travelers who could or would pay from \$300 to \$400 a month for a very modest apartment, and the majority counted themselves fortunate if they could secure a corner in a room already occupied by half a score of people.

One dark, rainy night, some twenty miners were wandering through the miry streets in search of a hotel.

Five or six rode worn-out, mud-bespattered steeds; others plodded on afoot, dragging their baggage after them on some kind of a hand-car; others again, more sparing of their money, or less successful at the diggings, had wrapped up their change of clothing and a few kitchen utensils in a blanket or two, and carried the bundle on their shoulders. A pick-ax, a hatchet, sometimes even a tent, and a "cradle," fastened on top of the whole, completed the heavy burden.

Although they entered San Francisco together, these miners came from different placers. Chance alone had brought them together on the road. Among them might have been reckoned Americans, Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Mexicans almost in equal numbers.

No doubt their season had proved satisfactory, for, notwithstanding the rain that fell in torrents, and in spite of the ruts into which they sank every now and again, they talked merrily on, and mingled many a joke with the blessings they lavished on the floods from above and the 'Frisco puddles beneath.

"Here's a hotel!" at last exclaimed a Frenchman, a late soap-dealer, named Ribonneau, all the way from Marseilles, in the "Sunny South."

As he uttered these words, with his eyes raised on what he thought was the signboard of a hotel, he stepped right into a hole, and fell his full height into a filthy quagmire. His placer-mate ran to his help.

The latter was just as thin as Ribonneau was stout, but "would have carried him under his arm any day." He was a tall Irishman, registered as Patrick O'Loughlin on the books of Clonmel parish, though best known at the mines as Patsy Green, a designation he had earned by his continual songs in honor of Green Erin.

While he lifted Ribonneau on to his feet, a Mexican, Enriquez Mundiaz by name, turned his bull's eye on the signboard, which proved to be that of a clothing store.

"All the same," said the Marseillaise, when he recovered his ordinary speech, "I tell you I am sure there is a hotel somewhere about here!"

"Ribonneau might be right," suggested the Mexican, "for there goes Jenkins, stalking off ahead of us by himself. Every time the cursed Yankee smells a posada or a rancho,

you bet he doesn't mind if he leaves us behind, so he gets the best place."

The miners seemed to share the speaker's opinion, for they hurried on "like one man," and, true enough, found Jenkins already knocking at the door of a hotel.

As it was not opened instantly, the poor door received such a shower of kicks and blows as bespoke well-filled leather belts and an utter disregard of consequences on the part of their owners. A peep through a grating, a few words exchanged between a waiter and the new-comers, some of whom seemed old acquaintances, and the besiegers made their entrance.

"We want rooms, wine, rum, brandy, bread, meat!" they shouted. And with their long beards, their strange head-dresses, and their coarse garments reeking with rain and mud, most of them would have been taken for highway robbers in any country but California.

"We've got all that—" the waiter began.

"Hurrah!" yelled the new-comers.

"Except the rooms!" he continued.

A volley of curses sent the poor fellow to the devil in English, French, and Spanish.

"What, not one?" asked Jenkins. "I'll give you anything you like for it!"

"So shall we!" chorused the others.

"I gave the last to a Frenchman, not five minutes ago," said the waiter.

"Well, and your parlor?"

"Full as an egg."

"Your dining-room?"

"There's a good dozen in there already. However, may be—"

"Yes, that's so! may be!" cried the miners, and driving the waiter before them they pushed their way into a large room on the right side of the hall.

A thick wooden table took up half the length of the room. The leaves had been unscrewed and were used as beds alongside the wall by several individuals who were already asleep, their heads resting on their baggage by way of pillows.

The miners soon laid down their burdens. Joe Plum, the waiter, helped them to joints of roast meat, bread,

pickles, mustard, ham, wine, beer, and brandy, and they were securing seats around the table, here a stool, and there a bench, when a new individual entered the room.

He was some thirty-five or forty years of age, above the average height, a fine figure. Although he was clad like most of the other miners, there was a something in him indicative of a man who belonged to a higher class than the majority of the present guests. His face, which must have been handsome in his youth, bore the marks of the most unbridled passions. Deep wrinkles furrowed his features.

"You waiter of Hell!" he called to Joe, "why don't you come when you are called?"

"Can't be everywhere at the same time, boss!" was the cool reply.

"Why! that's Vandeilles!" exclaimed Ribonneau. "How are you, old fellow?"

"How are you, Ribonneau?" answered Vandeilles, shaking him by the hand.

"Say, is that the famous dueler, the demon gambler, that killed James and Toby?" inquired one of the miners from his neighbor.

"The very man," replied the latter, who was nicknamed Craddle, "and I do hope he'll find his match some day."

While this charitable wish was being uttered, several other miners came and stretched their hands to Vandeilles with that free-and-easy familiarity which is so soon established in the gold-fields between men of the most different conditions of life.

"Are you only just landing, too?" they asked, seeing him as thoroughly soaked as they were themselves.

"Just this moment. Well, Joe, you cursed dog!" he cried, grabbing the waiter as he passed by him, "did you take your oath you would let us starve? Where are the things I told you to bring up to my room?"

Joe said something between his teeth and went on giving out wine and beer to the miners.

"Stay to supper with us, Vandeilles!" said several voices.

He hesitated for a moment; then, with the gesture of a man who has suddenly made up his mind, he whispered a few words to the attendant.

"You may be easy about that, sir," he replied, "I'll bring Madame up everything she wants?"

"I see," exclaimed Ribonneau, "you have your—"

"Ribonneau," sharply answered Vandeilles, "it is strange how often you forget that I hate indiscreet questions."

"That's all right, that's all right," replied his countryman, somewhat abashed; "henceforth we shall comply with your Lordship's desires."

"I should advise you to do so," said Vandeilles dryly.

Then sitting down with the other guests, he made a vigorous onslaught on the rumpsteak, the ham, and the pickles. For some time there was nothing heard but the clatter of the knives and forks. After half an hour's exercise at this kind of work, accompanied by numerous libations, the miners began to feel in a happier frame of mind. Loud outbursts of laughter were soon indulged in, as though there were no sleepers by the side of the banqueting table. Then came the punch and the grog, the pipes and the cigars. Before ten minutes, there were fifteen voices heard at the same time. Some sang, others told diggers' tales, and now and then some coarse joke would cause formidable peals of laughter.

"If only we had cards," sighed a miner from Kentucky.

"Let's ask the waiter for some!" said Vandeilles.

Joe, who had fallen asleep in a corner, was roused up. His answer was a plump refusal.

"We haven't one pack in the house," he said, "and besides, card playing is not allowed in any hotel at this hour of the night,—"

Interrupted by a very deluge of curses, Joe found, in the fact that everybody spoke at the same time, an excuse for replying to nobody in particular, and slipped out of the room.

"I've got cards, I have!" remarked a Mexican, who lazily raised himself on his elbow at the far end of the room.

"Out with them!" cried five or six miners, rushing toward him.

"Six fine, brand-new packs that I bought this morning," he continued tantalizingly.

"Fetch them out, then!" repeated the miners.

"I'll take two hundred dollars for them."

"The devil wring your neck!" thundered Jenkins. "For ten dollars I'd get double the lot!"

"Of course you might, if the stores were open. Well, you may take them or leave them."

At that time, in California, if you quarreled with a man and killed him you were pretty safe before the law; but the least attempt on individual property exposed you to being hanged on the spot. No one, therefore, dreamed of using violence to get possession of the Mexican's cards.

"Take fifty dollars?" suggested Jenkins.

"Good night to you all," replied the Mexican, as he gathered the folds of his cloak about him.

Vandeilles thereupon took out of his belt a handful of gold dust, picked up two or three pepitas and weighed them in the hollow of his hand.

"Let everybody do like me," he said. "Here's an ounce and a half for my share." (The American ounce of gold was then worth sixteen dollars.)

The other miners followed the Frenchman's example with more or less liberality; the sum of \$200 was soon made up; then Vandeilles, in whose hat the contributions had been collected, threw the proceeds to the Mexican and received the coveted packs in exchange.

"Every man to his seat," he called, drawing a big three-legged stool toward the table for himself.

"What game are we going to play?" asked Enriquez Mundiaz.

"Poker, of course," answered Jenkins.

"No, no! No such thing!" shouted several of the men, who seemed to think that Jenkins would be too sharp for them at poker.

"That's too handy a game for Greeks," said a Mexican bluntly.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jenkins, in a threatening tone of voice.

"Hold your peace, will you?" called O'Loughlin; "can't we play nice and quiet like Christians?"

Before the amicable proposal could be answered one of the Mexicans voted for monte, and was at once naturally supported by all his countrymen; this was more than sufficient reason for the Americans to persist in backing poker.

"I am going to settle that point," said Vandeilles, who

had listened to the discussion with apparent unconcern while he was shuffling the cards to make them glide the more easily and mix them up the better. "The game for to-night is lansquenet!"

"That's a game we don't know," cried two or three voices.

"You'll soon know all about it. It's just like monte. Here you are, gentlemen; make up your games; I hold the bank."

"Why should you start rather than any of us?" inquired Jenkins.

Vandeilles vouched no other reply than a shrug of his shoulders; he poured on the table a certain quantity of gold dust, and laid his six-chambered revolver on top of it.

"I insist on the bank being drawn for!" said Jenkins.

"Very good," answered Vandeilles; "then we shall draw with this," and he clutched the handle of the long hunting knife that hung from his belt.

"Certainly," rejoined Jenkins, as he took his bowie-knife out of its sheath.

"Say, Jenkins," whispered Craddle, as he caught his fiery countryman by the arm, "you want to be chopped up for mince meat, do you? Poor Jim handled the knife a sight better than you. That did not prevent this d—d frog-eater splitting his skull open for him in less than two minutes."

Jenkins hesitated for a moment and eventually resumed his seat, though not without some muttered threats. Vandeilles raised his shoulders with a look of contempt, and commenced his bank, the possession of which nobody now thought of denying him.

One look at the bully handling the gold and the cards, and you at once "sized" him for a passionate gambler, capable of sacrificing anything, everything, to the demon he was possessed with.

He held in his hands a pair of small scales he had borrowed from a bystander, and poured the stake of each player, one after the other, into one of them, while he filled the other with an equal weight of gold-dust which he took from the heap before him, and finally laid the contents of each scale in separate heaps on the table.

At first, luck was all on the banker's side. In less than

half an hour, Vandeilles had gathered in front of him several pounds of pepitas and gold dust. Just then the door was swung open, and three new-comers made their appearance.

"Here come the Goliaths!" gasped some of the miners, with a frightened look.

"So much the better!" echoed Jenkins. "Hang me if Vandeilles and big Tom don't throttle each other before an hour's time!"

This nickname,—*"the Goliaths,"*—as well known as it was dreaded throughout the placers, had been given to two brothers, two Americans, whose real name was Smithson, and to a cousin of theirs, Harry Kellow.

Tom, the eldest, to whom the *soubriquet* was particularly applied, was in truth a giant both in height and in muscular power. His reddish, short-cropped hair stood, like the bristles of a brush, over his low, narrow forehead. His beard of the same shade, as rugged as a bison's mane, covered his blood-tinted cheeks almost up to his eyes. The glances shot by those eyes from under their thick lashes, the coarse tone of voice, the rough manner of the fellow, everything in him revealed an utter absence of manly feeling, a haughty consciousness of animal strength, a vice-enslaved brute in human shape.

Philip, the younger of the Smithsons, was a faithful, if somewhat mitigated, second edition of his brother. Both were charged, under breath, with many a murder, and were the terror of all, far and wide. Their usual companion and accomplice was their cousin Harry, whose size and strength, whose vices and cruel nature, made him the worthy peer of his two relatives.

"Make room, you fellows!" growled Tom, as he cast his brutish eye right and left of him.

There was scarce a man in that room who was not above average strength, in the prime of life, and full of energy and determination. Still, such was the evil reputation of the Goliaths, that, on their simple bidding, a passage was opened for them right up to the gambling table.

"My soul! They are playing cards!" roared Tom. "A good job, too! I need not go all the way to Dupont Street to lose my ounces of gold. Here, get off that stool, will you?" he added, addressing a Mexican who was partly lying on the table, apparently worn out by fever.

And as the poor fellow did not get out of the giant's way as quickly as he wished, he sent him rolling to the other end of the room with a twist of his hand.

"Say, won't you keep quiet over there?" cried two or three miners, roused from their sleep by this new kind of missile.

"Go asleep, you coyotes!" replied Goliath. "I shall go on as long as I like!"

Recovering from his temporary feeling of giddiness, the Mexican grasped his machete and made a rush on his cowardly aggressor. Tom grasped the arm of the fever-stricken weakling, wrenched his machete from him, and knocked him to the ground a second time with a blow right in the chest. The latter, maddened by this new discomfiture, would have made for Goliath again, and rushed to certain death, had not a powerful hand suddenly caught his ankle in an iron grasp. He turned and looked down, beside himself with rage; but a cry of surprise and joy escaped his lips before he had time to notice the premonitory finger that bade him be silent.

"What! Bras d'Acier?"

However low the name had been pronounced, several individuals, lying close by, had heard it, and in a moment they had raised themselves on their elbows to see the man who had been thus addressed.

Seeing himself recognized, Bras d'Acier at once got up on his feet and kept back with a wave of his hand the several miners who were hastening toward him. A friendly nod promised him obedience, and the bright smile that accompanied it told him how delighted they were to see him among them.

Meanwhile he had wrapped himself in his zarape, up to his chin, had brought down the brim of his sombrero over his eyes; and, drawing near the table, he stood in silence behind a group of miners.

CHAPTER II.

A MAN, EVERY INCH OF HIM!

THE personage so famous at this time in the Californian placers under the name of Bras d'Acier was of middle height, but admirably proportioned. In those countries, where a man is so often obliged to fight for his belong-

ings or for his life, he very quickly learns to estimate his own physical powers as well as those of every one he meets. Under the apparently somewhat slender limbs of Pablo, a practiced eye would soon have divined a prodigious strength and very uncommon powers of endurance. The elasticity of his movements and his sunburnt complexion recalled the Spanish creole. The impassiveness of his physiognomy contrasted strangely with the extraordinary brightness of his large dark eyes, which, fixed and pensive, under their slightly arched lashes, seemed as though forever gazing at some mysterious image in the distant world of dreamland. So steel-like was his arm in its unerring aim and the temper of its muscles, that the nick-name *Bras d'Acier*, given him one day by a Frenchman, had there and then been fixed upon him by the many-tongued population of the mining districts.

"José," he whispered to the Mexican, who stood near him, and looked vengeance at the eldest of the Smithsons, "what placer do these Goliaths come from?"

"God knows," replied José. "The wretches don't stop long in the same place. As soon as they have 'done a job' in one placer, they soon slip off to another to start afresh. Believe me, *Bras d'Acier*, the greatest service you'll ever have rendered the country will be the day when you clear those three out of it!"

As the Mexican finished these words, Vandeilles, who had just lost heavily, struck the table with his fist, and vented his wrath with a flood of blasphemy.

He purchased the bank of his right-hand neighbor, and began weighing fresh stakes. As he raised up the pair of scales, a peculiar-shaped diamond ring, which he wore on the little finger of his left hand, attracted Pablo's attention. An expression of painful surprise darkened his face, usually so reticent a tell-tale of his emotions; and he suddenly moved close to the players, his eyes riveted on the jeweled ring.

Then, after a few minutes' silent observation, he opened the cartridge pouch hanging from his belt, drew out of it a small leather bag filled with gold dust, and threw upon the table a nugget that weighed at least four pounds.

"The devil!" ejaculated Vandeilles, turning in astonishment toward the bold player who was thus starting with a thousand-dollar stake.

"Are you on?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"Of course!" said the Frenchman.

And so saying, he poured out, opposite the nugget, an equivalent quantity of gold dust. The next moment, he turned up two aces.

"That lot is mine!" he cried, picking up the gold.

Bras d'Acier threw down a heavier stake than the first and lost it. Five or six games he thus went on playing and losing, one after the other, without betraying the slightest sign of annoyance or heed, until at last, seeing his little bag almost empty, he turned it right inside out. Only a few ounces of dust fell into his hand.

"Well?" queried Vandeilles, seeing that his adversary did not come forward.

All the spectators, grouped around the table, looked at Pablo with a feeling of curiosity all the greater as some of them imagined they recognized him.

"Wait a moment," said he to the gambler.

Thereupon, he took off his cloak, threw his hat on the table, and turned round to the miners.

"Bras d'Acier! Bras d'Acier!" they shouted, with unmistakable satisfaction.

Those who were nearest held out their hands to him, others struggled forward or stood on the benches to catch his eye. The Goliaths themselves had jumped up and were whispering low to each other while they examined him.

"Now then!" called Vandeilles, whose passion for play stifled, of course, any feeling of curiosity he might have experienced, "do we play or do we not?"

"Who will lend me some gold?" asked Bras d'Acier.

Vandeilles indulged in a quiet laugh. Miners are not fond of lending. But to his utter stupefaction the only difficulty with the borrower in this case was choosing among the purses and the belts that were held out to him at arm's length.

"Thank you, friends," said the latter, without appearing surprised at such an extraordinary proceeding. "Which of you have been the most unlucky this season?"

"I have! I have!" exclaimed five or six, among whom were José Guerino, Craddle, Ribonneau, and Patsy Green.

"Well, hand me what gold you have!"

They obeyed with as much joyful alacrity as if Bras d'Acier, instead of asking them for gold, had announced a public distribution of nuggets.

"What the devil does this mean?" inquired Vandeilles of his neighbor. "The richest man here might have asked his best friend for a pound of dust, to be paid back in the double to-morrow, without a chance of getting it. And here they are positively throwing their belts to a man who has just lost all he had!"

"I believe you!" replied the miner. "I'd give all I have, willingly, to be in José's shoes this minute. The few ounces he just gave Bras d'Acier will be as good as a fortune to him."

Vandeilles would have questioned him further, but Pablo now put down a fresh stake and the game was resumed. The banker turned up a seven for himself and a knave for Bras d'Acier; several cards then followed without any result.

"Seven! I've won!" exclaimed Vandeilles.

"How much is there before you?" calmly inquired Pablo.

"Seventy-two pounds, nine ounces,"* answered the Frenchman, after weighing the nuggets and the dust.

"*Banquo*," said Bras d'Acier.

And on a motion of his hand purses and belts were once more handed to him. Even the Goliaths, after exchanging a few words, followed the example of the other miners. Tom stretched out to the young man a bag which must have contained some ten pounds of gold at least.

Pablo pushed it back.

"Why won't you have ours?" asked Goliath angrily.

"Because that gold comes from thieving and murdering," answered Pablo, in the calmest tone of voice.

A death-like silence followed these words; then Goliath grumbled something; but before his clumsy brain had found out a reply Vandeilles had taken up the cards again.

"Come!" he said, as he thought over the enormous sum he was about risking, "I might do well, perhaps, to pass my hand."

"Then I take it," said Pablo.

*Twenty thousand dollars.

"Then again, no, I won't!" continued the gambler, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll see it out to the end. Here, there goes a four for me, a nine for you—"

And amid breathless silence, he turned up a five, then a seven, another seven, then a two.

"Nine!" shouted the miners, as if with one voice.

"You, cursed card!" yelled Vandeilles, bringing down his fist on the card that had given the game to his adversary.

"I give you two hundred dollars for your bank," said Pablo to the miner who was to take his turn after Vandeilles.

"Right you are."

"Now then, gentlemen, your stakes," said Bras d'Acier, as he shuffled the cards.

It was so unusual to see him touching a pack of cards that the players looked at each other, wondering what they should do. Vandeilles, with haggard eyes and knitted brows, threw on the table the little gold dust he still had; but luck had turned against him.

The bank won straight away from the first.

"Nothing more, not a dollar left!" he growled, after searching all his pockets with the rage of the gambler who finds himself in the impossibility of indulging his terrible passion.

"You have jewels about you," remarked Pablo; "you have a watch, you have rings on your fingers. I will give you five pounds of gold for them."

"This ring alone would fetch over a thousand dollars," answered Vandeilles, pointing to the ring which had attracted Bras d'Acier's attention so much.

"Well, let us say ten pounds, if you like."

A twitching of Vandeilles's features revealed the violent struggle that was going on in his mind.

"No!" he said, with an effort.

"No more about it, then, though it might have been the means of setting you up again. The play is on, gentlemen."

Twice in immediate succession Bras d'Acier won. Vandeilles could stand it no longer.

"Will you give me fifteen pounds for my jewels and this ring?" he asked the banker.

"It is more than they are worth," answered the creole. "Well, never mind ; I take them."

Vandeilles took the ring from his finger and jerked it on the table with his other trinkets.

"Lost again !" he yelled, a moment later.

And he left the room with frightful oaths, and gave the door such a bang as was heard through the whole house.

"Why ! You have taken up card-playing now, Bras d'Acier ?" remarked an old Mexican to Pablo, who was continuing his bank and turning up the cards almost without looking at them.

"A mere whim ! I am tired of it already. Here, I pass my hand to the next."

And so saying, Pablo stood up and beckoned to those who had loaned him their gold to come over to him.

A look of disappointment was visible on their countenances, though each of them in his turn received double the amount he had advanced. The borrower noticed it.

"This little installment is only for fun," he said. "I have taken all your names, and next season you come out with me."

A joyous hurrah greeted this promise ; and congratulations, not unmingled with a little envy, were showered on the fortunate few.

"Say, José," said one, "if you will give me your place, I pay you down ten pounds of nuggets on the spot."

"No, by my soul ! If I were to die on the road, I won't sell such a chance of making my fortune !"

"Bras d'Acier," said the same miner, turning to him, "it was no fault of ours if you did not take our gold ; it was offered you with a good heart."

"That's right enough," replied Bras d'Acier, after a moment's consideration. "Well, here I have fourteen men already, and my intention was to divide them in two bands ; you are eight there ; make up a third band, then, under Jenkins."

"Long life to you, Bras d'Acier !" cried the miners.

"You left two out," said a voice at the end of the room.

"James and Pepe are out of reckoning."

"Why so, Don Pablo ?" asked James, coming forward.

"We were just as willing as the others."

"You know why as well as I do. Both of you had

promised me to lay by one third of what you would get at the San Benito placer for that poor Lumlyn's widow and children. I was told the other day you had broken your word. Not a thing will you ever get from me !”

“We *shall* send the woman her share,” murmured Pepe.

“And you shall double it,” continued Pablo. “If to-morrow, by twelve o'clock, that poor widow has not received two thirds of the thirty-five pounds of gold you gathered between you two, I am the man who will go and demand her share from you.”

“And after that, you'll let us start with our comrades here ?” inquired James.

“Never,” was the sharp reply.

The two men hung down their heads and withdrew behind the others. Just then Vandeilles returned, holding in his hand a chamois-leather purse, elegantly embroidered, which seemed to contain barely a few ounces of dust. In an instant he was playing again ; and, by the time it was his turn to deal, he had gained five or six pounds.

“It seems you play *à la* Charlemagne style, *Bras d'Acier !*” he called out, seeing that the latter had gone to lie down again.

“That's the usual thing in this country, you know ! As to that, look here, I have won about sixty pounds of gold from you ; well, I am quite willing to play the whole of it with you in one go, if you like. But I insist on one condition : this shall be my last game, whatever may be the result.”

“I only have about ten pounds. Will you take them ?” asked Vandeilles.

“I take them !”

The Frenchman turned up a card. It was a king, the very card of his adversary.

“Lost again and again !” he shrieked. “Hell itself is against me this night !”

“Keep that gold if you care for it,” said Pablo, declining the stake he was handing him. “I have no need for it, just now ; you will return it to me some other day.”

“Yes, but if I lose it.”

“You will give it back to me after next season.”

Vandeilles hesitated a moment ; but he was so thoroughly possessed by the demon of gambling that he had not the

courage to resist the temptation. He stammered his thanks and continued to play with variable success, until, suddenly, a quarrel sprang up between him and the eldest of the Smithsons about a doubtful turn up.

"We are being robbed here," coarsely remarked the giant, always on the look-out for an excuse to avoid paying.

"You lie, you Yankee hound!" straightway replied Vandeilles, who, truth to tell, had played fair, regardless of all his ill-luck.

"You've cheated; I take back my stake!"

"You touch it, if you dare!"

The bully shrugged his shoulders, spread his big, hairy hand over the tiny heap of gold dust which was the cause of disagreement, and drew it toward him.

Unable to stop his arm, notwithstanding all his efforts, Vandeilles, in his rage, scattered about with a powerful "back-hander" the pepitas that Tom was almost pouring back into his belt. Goliath answered him with a blow of his fist which knocked the Frenchman's head violently against the table. The latter was up again in a bound and seized his revolver; but at the same instant Tom caught his wrist and made it impossible for him to use his weapon. The uncommon strength with which Vandeilles was naturally endowed was now heightened by his maddening passion, and he made desperate attempts to free his arm from the vise that held it. With his left hand, still free, he clutched Goliath's throat. The latter at once took from his belt a long sharp-bladed knife, which he opened with his teeth, when Vandeilles threw his whole weight upon him with such violence that both fell with a tremendous thud to the ground. There they struggled for a few moments, but soon Goliath's proverbial brute force overpowered the Frenchman. He succeeded in getting him under him; then, keeping him down with his knee and his left hand, he strove to free his right arm, which Vandeilles held with all the energy of despair. The Frenchman had now no weapon of defense, for in his fall he had dropped his revolver, and Goliath had instantly kicked it under the table.

Standing in a circle around the two combatants the miners looked on with the same kind of curiosity as if the fight had been between two animals. Indeed, but for the celeb-

rity of the two parties, no one would have even left his seat to come and see the issue; some other player would have seized the opportunity to take the bank and the game would have been proceeded with as if nothing had happened.

Frightened at the danger to which his countryman was exposed, Ribonneau twice attempted to go to his rescue; Philip and Harry, Tom's brother and his cousin, threw themselves before him and threw him back with awful threats.

"Will you cry off now, you French cur?" asked Goliath.

"Never!" gasped he, although well-nigh crushed to death under the enormous weight of his opponent.

A sudden, mighty jerk, the giant's right arm was free, and he brandished his knife with a savage cry of triumph.

On the same instant the circle made by the spectators was broken through, Goliath's uplifted knife was snatched from his hand, and in the twinkling of an eye had joined Vandeilles's revolver under the table.

Tom roared with rage, while Philip and Harry made a dart for Bras d'Acier. He moved back and, with his zarape round his left arm by way of a shield, awaited their onslaught. Several miners stepped up to help him, but he thanked them with a friendly gesture. Just then, however, he noticed Philip handing another knife to his brother, who was battering the head of his adversary against the floor. With a tiger-like bound he was down upon him. Seeing his cousin fall to the ground, Harry made a thrust of his machete at Pablo. Parrying the blow with his left arm, and answering with a stab of the knife he had just snatched from Philip's hand, was for the creole the work of an instant; and Harry, struck full in the chest, reeled like a drunken man and fell dead.

At the same moment, a bullet whizzed close by Pablo's ear. Luckily, he had seen Philip aiming at him and had stooped just in time. In a trice he had wrenched his revolver from him, and with a terrific blow of the butt-end on the head had stunned him to earth.

"Look out, Bras d'Acier!" called the miners.

Tom had left Vandeilles unconscious, and after knocking down poor José, who had bravely thrown himself in his way, was coming for Pablo. Before the latter had time to draw out his machete, the American's bowie-knife came

down on him like a flash of lightning ; a side jerk barely saved his skull from being split open ; the next moment he was up and had taken out his machete.

" Let no one stir ! " he said to the miners.

They obeyed, and merely kept Philip from going to his brother's help.

From the very start, Goliath understood that, despite his strength and the skill with which he handled the bowie-knife, he was no match for Bras d'Acier. Suddenly his adversary's machete, whirled with incredible swiftness, slashed off half his left ear and wounded him in the shoulder. With a yell of rage he renewed the maneuver that had proved so successful in his encounter with Vandeilles and seized Pablo's right arm with his left hand. Pablo at once executed the same movement, and both stood, facing each other, each endeavoring to release his right arm while at the same time holding that of his antagonist.

CHAPTER III.

A FIGHT WITH AN UNEXPECTED ENDING.

AT the first glance cast on the two combatants, the issue seemed but little open to doubt. With the advantage of his giant-like size, Goliath appeared capable of crushing in his bony hand the slender wrist of his adversary. Not an inch, however, did the latter yield. Not a muscle in his features betrayed the supreme effort he needs must make to withstand the giant's pressure. On the contrary, the purple on Tom's face grew deeper and deeper every moment. Large drops of perspiration rolled down his marbled cheeks. Looking down on Pablo from his full height, he had at first kept his small, besotted eyes fixed upon him, but soon the relentless dart of the creole's glance had sent a chill through his heart and forced him to turn away from it as though it had been the sharp point of a dagger. Twice Goliath, gathering all his strength, tried to snap off his fetters ; each time Pablo's steel arm yielded for a second and immediately sprang back into position with all the greater force. The creole's superiority became more

visible every moment. Goliath's hurried breathing and the contraction of his features gave evident signs of stiffness and fatigue. He felt it himself, and presently, making a desperate lurch forward, he well-nigh drove the point of his bowie-knife into the creole; the bystanders uttered a cry; but Pablo, whose shoulder had been merely grazed, was up again already, and his own machete could now be seen slowly, irresistibly drawing nearer and nearer the giant's breast.

Goliath was horrible to behold. He foamed at the mouth like a boar at bay. A hideous expression of rage, of shame, and of apprehension, distorted his blood and sweat-stained features.

The oaths that hissed through his grinding teeth would have caused any ordinary listener to shudder. A few paces away from him, Philip, vainly struggling away from the miners, looked upon him as a dead man. The one last link still existing between those two crime-sodden beings, and the human kind to which they belonged by birth, was the brotherly affection they had for each other.

The deepest silence reigned in the apartment; painfully did each breast heave under the oppression of an unspeakable emotion.

"Mercy!" at last murmured Goliath, who felt his arm giving way and saw the glistening point of the machete within two inches of his chest.

"No," said Bras d'Acier, "it would be a crime to let a fiend like you live!"

"I never did anything to you, Bras d'Acier."

"You availed yourself of your strength to rob or murder poor miners that you found by themselves in out-of-the-way places, or even lying sick. Wretch, commend your soul to God, if you still know how to pray!"

Goliath answered by making one more effort to shake himself away from his implacable foe, but this very jerk enabled Pablo to free the handle of his machete, and now—

"Mercy, for Heaven's sake!" a woman's voice suddenly called from one end of the room.

Extraordinary was the effect produced on Pablo by the sound of that voice. He released his hold and turned round.

"Who was it that spoke?" he asked, with visible emotion, as he surveyed all the by-standers.

Nobody answered. One of the miners pointed to the door that had just been shut and was still trembling. Pablo opened it; there was no one visible; but at the other extremity of the corridor another door was heard slamming. The creole's first impulse was to make a rush for that door; but, remarking that he had been followed by several of the spectators, he contained himself and re-entered the room.

"Goliath," said he to the giant, who stanchd the blood flowing from his wound, "for this day I set you off; but bear in mind, the very first time I hear of a crime committed by you or your brother, I'll set out after you and rid this earth of both of you, were I to travel the length and breadth of California to find you. Ask any of the men you see here; they will tell you if Bras d'Acier has ever failed to his word. Let *him* go," he continued, addressing the miners who still held the younger Smithson prisoner.

They obeyed with evident regret. Philip ran to his brother. They whispered a few words to each other and presently left the room, carrying away their cousin Harry's corpse with them.

"We shall see each other again!" said Tom, shaking his fist at the creole as he opened the door.

Then, yielding to a movement of rage, he seized his revolver and fired on Pablo. The bullet missed him. The miners expected to see him dart on the coward, but he did not stir.

"What a pity you did not settle those two scoundrels, Bras d'Acier. If you only knew all they have done!"

The words were spoken with genuine, heart-felt regret, but he ignored them.

"What has become of Mr. Vandeilles?" he inquired.

The Frenchman was barely recovering from the fit of unconsciousness in which Goliath had left him, and lay half recumbent on a bench. On hearing his name pronounced he made an effort to rise, and poured himself a full glass of rum. Then, somewhat revived by this stimulating draught, he advanced toward Bras d'Acier, supporting himself along the edge of the table, and thanked him for his timely intervention with a constrained and embarrassed air which did not pass unnoticed by the creole.

"My father was a Frenchman like yourself, sir," inter-

rupted Pablo, with cold politeness; "I could not let a compatriot be butchered before my eyes. Besides, I did no more than any of these gentlemen around us; it is to them you should address your thanks even more than to me."

Vandeilles heaved a sigh, like a man relieved of a painful obligation. He kept a grudge against his late lucky adversary at the gambling-table, and any bond of gratitude toward him would have been a heavy burden to bear. He was therefore but too glad to turn to the miners and thank them, much to their surprise, for in point of fact, with the exception of Ribonneau, not one of them had stirred an inch to help him.

He then left the room. Two or three times it seemed as if Pablo would call him back, but, apparently, other counsels prevailed, momentarily at least; for no sooner had the noise of the Frenchman's footsteps died away in the corridor than he went out himself, motioning to his companions not to follow him.

During the ten minutes he was away, comments were passed, with more or less freedom, on the unusual emotion the immovable Bras d'Acier had just betrayed, and on the singularly unexpected quarter he had granted Goliath.

"I bet my bottom dollar," said Craddle, "that the party who cried mercy for Goliath is the little young man who lifted Vandeilles from the ground while we were looking at Tom and Bras d'Acier squaring up their account. And I am just that certain, too, that it was this same party had just gone out when Bras d'Acier ran to the door; for I have not been able to find any sign of him in this parlor since."

"Why, it was a woman's voice we heard, surely!" observed Enriquez Mundiaz.

"Well, stranger, mightn't it happen to be the voice of a woman with a full line of gent's clothing?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ribonneau, "might it have been—"

He bit his lips on seeing Bras d'Acier reappear. The latter waved his hand to the miners, wrapped himself up in his zarape, and without a word laid himself on his board, apparently to sleep. But José, who occupied another leaf of the table close by, and who could not close his eyes owing to the fever he was in, told his mates next morning how Pablo had remained wide awake all the night.

CHAPTER IV.

POOR WOMAN !

ON leaving the parlor where these incidents had taken place, Vandeilles directed his faltering steps away down the passage to a door, at which he gave a particular knock.

"Is that you, Amédée?" asked a woman's voice.

"Of course it is I!" was the impassioned reply.

A key grated in the lock and Vandeilles entered a room, let us rather say a closet, so small, so narrow, that a mattress, a chair, and a kind of press, taxed it to its utmost capacity.

He slammed the door behind him, and let himself drop on the chair, against the back of which he laid his bruised head.

A woman, still in her youth and of remarkable beauty, but whose pinched features told of cruel trials, clasped her hands in silence and raised heavenward her large dark eyes, filled with speechless grief.

"What has happened you, Amédée?" she asked, after a moment. "Do speak, Amédée."

"Can't you guess it?" he said, with ill-contained rage. "I've lost all—all—everything!"

And she, sorrow-stricken, silently gazed on him as he raised his clenched fist and cursed himself and his ill-luck.

"Why! my ring!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Where is it? Surely you did not play *that*?"

Vandeilles hung down his head and made no reply.

"What have you done with it, Amédée? Will you not speak?"

"Did I not tell you I lost everything? Do you hear? Everything!" he answered, with the effrontery of the bully who feels himself in the wrong.

"But that ring was not yours!" cried the young woman. "A while ago, when you came and took our last resource from me, the last few ounces of gold I had kept myself, I felt but too sure of what would become of them! I knew very well that by to-morrow, as has been the case so often before, we should not have one dollar left to pay for our food or lodging."

"Berthe!" interrupted Vandeilles.

"Yes!" she continued, with the fearlessness of despair, "I did know all that, knowing you as I do; and still I was weak enough to hand you the little savings I had made in view of what did come to pass; but that ring, sir, I never gave it to you! You had no right to dispose of it! What you have done is infamous!"

"There, there, there! Here is the lecturing beginning!" said Vandeilles. "Why, I allowed myself to be carried away. I was hoping to set myself up again, and were it not for a cursed run of ill-luck—"

The poor woman's heart-rending sobs interrupted the excuses with which her husband endeavored to justify his conduct against his own conviction.

"By all the powers below," he shouted at last, "you seem to have that ring singularly at heart. On the part of a woman who cares so little about showy toilette as you do, I am at a loss to understand all this fuss over a miserable trinket. How fond you must have been of the person who gave it to you!"

"That ring came from a friend of my mother's," she replied.

"At least, that is what you have already told me!" rejoined her husband, with knitted brows. "Well, it can't be but I'll get it back for you some day. I can't always be unlucky, even if the devil himself—"

He could say no more. The shooting pains darting through his brain were now so maddening that he closed his eyes, raised his two hands to his head, and sank heavily to the ground.

Berthe uttered a cry of terror. Then, forgetting all his faults and all her grief, she knelt by the wounded man and lavished her gentlest care upon him.

In his struggle with Goliath, Vandeilles had received no serious wound; but, as a consequence of the long pressure made on his chest and the reiterated knocks of his skull against the floor, the rush of blood to his head was such as to imperil his very life.

His wife hastened to loosen the cravat around his neck and to throw water on his face. This would probably have proved insufficient, but a slight scratch he had received in this last fall bled profusely, and perhaps saved him. Within

a quarter of an hour he was on his feet again and was able to answer Berthe, who sought to calm him and inspire him with hopes which she herself was far from indulging.

"I am a wretch, and ought to blow my brains out!" he would repeat.

And the poor woman was noble-hearted enough to make an effort to lessen his guilt in his own eyes, and to extenuate the sins the consequences of which told on her so cruelly.

With that readiness with which a man accepts any excuse, good or bad, that may seem to justify his conduct, Amédée allowed himself to be convinced, and began developing fifty different schemes by which he expected to regain his fortune and provide for the requirements of his present position. Berthe feigned some little confidence in the future, and at last succeeded in changing the subject of conversation.

"What took place, in there, this evening?" she added. "I thought I heard a shot."

"Yes," replied Vandeilles, "it was a shot that one of those scoundrels, those Goliaths, fired at a man they call Bras d'Acier. By heavens, I'd give something to know who that fellow is! He puzzles me more than I can say."

"Was he hurt?"

"I don't think so. Just at that moment I was almost unconscious, so that I hardly know what was going on about me. By the way, it seemed to me I heard your voice. Surely, you did not come into that room?"

"I did, just for an instant."

"Had I not positively forbidden you—?"

"I heard a shot; I knew you to be so passionate, so quarrelsome, especially when you lose—I began to fear something had happened you, and that fear overcame all other considerations. In any case, I came away the very moment you commenced to recover your senses, and as I am dressed almost like a man, nobody noticed me."

"I hope it may be so, though I should be surprised," answered her husband, with all the bitter injustice and that mania for recriminating, so common to all jealousy-diseased minds. "And so you were present at the fight between Goliath and Bras d'Acier. A good job it would have been if they had ripped each other. I hate those two men, one almost as much as the other! It is that Bras d'Acier who

won all I had from me. That man's look of authority and his unheard-of coolness vex me and exasperate me. I must make out his history."

Madame Vandeilles had listened in silence. Whether exhausted with fatigue or desirous to avoid this topic, she had dropped her head on the bundle of clothes that occupied the place of the pillow on her miserable bed and seemed to have fallen asleep.

"Poor woman!" muttered Vandeilles, as he looked at her, "what a sad day for her the day she married me! Good God, what a life I have led her! I take my oath I'll give up gambling and jealousy! I'll get rich and—when I think that one hour ago, but for that cursed nine I turned up, I had over forty thousand dollars in hands! I ought to have passed my turn just then—but again if I had won—that lansquenet is a treacherous game! Monte is safer, and so is baccarat. Next time I must calculate better!"

And the gambler, who a moment before had sworn to himself he would never play any more, fell asleep meditating fresh combinations of monte and lansquenet.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNCEREMONIOUS GUEST.

MAN has an instinctive dislike to find himself alone with those he has wronged, even when he knows they are generous enough to make no complaints.

Vandeilles had nothing to apprehend from Berthe, not one bitter reproach, not one look of reprimand even; still he felt he would be ill at ease in her presence, and when, on his first awaking, he was at once beset by the thought of his penurious condition, he fancied he might escape for a few hours the haunting of his troubles by fleeing the presence of the poor woman who recalled them to him so forcibly. He took all possible care not to awake her, and stole out of the room.

"Where the deuce are you going to, old fellow?" asked Ribonneau, stumbling across him in the corridor and taking his arm with his wonted familiarity.

"I don't know. I am going for a stroll about town."

"Come and have breakfast with me?"

"I don't mind if I do."

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting before a little table at Delmonico's, and the waiter was handing them the bill of fare.

"Suppose we have some fresh eggs," suggested the Marseilles man; "fresh eggs from France!"

"From France?" repeated Vandeilles. "What a joke!"

"Well, see for yourself!"

And Vandeilles read on the card: *Fresh eggs from France, one dollar each.*

"Upon my soul, omelets must cost a nice sum here!" he remarked.

"Who cares? There's nothing too good for us now!"

And Ribonneau ordered a sumptuous breakfast.

"Say! you found a regular treasure at your placer on the *Maladetto*, did you?" inquired his guest.

"Not a bit of it, but since Bras d'Acier was good enough to borrow from me last night—"

"Well?"

"Well, I am one of the gang for the first expedition, and I would not give my share for forty—no, not for sixty pounds of gold!"

"Really, I am glad you have brought him on the *tapis*. Who or what is that mysterious man that seems to command such general regard?"

"Can it be you never heard of Bras d'Acier?"

"I did, but in vague sort of way. He is a gold-seeker, isn't he? A *gambusino*?"

"A *gambusino* if you like; but a mere amateur, not a professional."

"You have no idea how that man tickles my curiosity. Tell me something about him."

"The fact is, I only know what I heard, right and left, myself; and I believe that's about all anybody else knows. I do know for a certainty that his real name is Pablo de Verrières; that his father was French and his mother came from Lima. The Kinklas tribe, I am told, murdered his father a long time ago. He himself used to live somewhere about the San José Mission and there was nothing talked

of, the whole country round, but his skill, his strength, and his bravery. All of a sudden, about two years ago, his mother having died a little while before that, he sold out all his property without anybody knowing the reason why, and began traveling all over California, always by himself and with no other protection but his carbine, his revolvers, and his machete. From one placer he went to another, never staying more than a day or two, unless there was some good turn or another to do the miners. If, for instance, he came across poor devils whose provisions had run out, or who were molested by a bear, jaguar, or may-be a bush-ranger, away he went and never left them for good till he had renewed their stock, destroyed the wild beast, or put a bullet through the thief. They say he once cleared a district, with his own hand, of a whole score of grizzly bears."

"A score seems a lot!" remarked Vandeilles, with a little sneer.

"I'll grant you that; but I myself have seen Bras d'Acier, with my two eyes, settle a big brute of a grizzly not twenty paces from where I stood. He allowed the bear to come almost within arm's length of him, and then quietly lodged a bullet under his shoulder blade."

"And the bear fell dead?"

"He did not; but two more shots in the ear finished him in less time than I take to tell you about it—and all this, my friend, as coolly and calmly as you or I would pop a partridge."

"I guess he charges a good price for those services?"

"What, Bras d'Acier? Why, he is off and away before you have time to say 'thank you!'"

"Then, it is as *gambusino* he makes a living? He, no doubt, sells the placers he discovers?"

"Not in the least! he gives them away. That's what I meant to tell you when I said he was an amateur *gambusino*."

"If so, how does he come by that gold that he risks so light-hearted?"

"Well, of course, when he lights upon a *crestone*,—and they say he has a natural knack for finding them,—you'll understand it does not take him long to get a few nuggets. He just contents himself with what he can knock off with his *barreta*, and goes on his way after covering up the

crestone and taking sufficient landmarks to indicate it to any unlucky miner he may run across. The only reserve he ever makes is for the benefit of those that have the luck to render him a service. Look ! Not later than last year a poor devil of an Englishman had been working away for two months at the placer on the Three-Butts, barely scraping enough to keep himself from starving. One day he was chopping wood in the forest,—his hatchet was the only tool he had still,—when he happens to stumble on Bras d'Acier, lying unconscious and bleeding by the side of a dead grizzly. He lifts him up and attends to his wound as best he can, and gives him—I must tell the truth of the fellow—his very last cup of tea—”

“Well ? well ?” asked Vandeilles, irritated at the pause Ribonneau was now making, with a view, doubtless, to add more solemnity to his narrative.

“Well, three months after, my blessed Briton was returning to San Francisco with eighty pounds of gold at the very least ; and you may ask Jenkins and Craddle about it ; they know the fellow personally.”

“Now I understand the deference everybody shows your man ; but what on earth can drive him thus from placer to placer like the Wandering Jew ?”

“That’s what nobody can make out. And if ever that is even hinted at, in his presence, he gives you, just once, a sort of a dagger glance, as I have heard it called, and you don’t feel particularly desirous to insist any further.”

“Still, in the course of a friendly chat ?”

“He never chats, never laughs, my dear fellow ; a downright statue of bronze. That’s even the reason why the great event of the day at our hotel is that last night he was thought to betray something like a little emotion on no less than two occasions.”

“Indeed ? What about ?”

“That is the question !” slyly replied Ribonneau, who, naturally loquacious, now felt his tongue nimbler than ever, thanks to the very liberal amount of wine and liquors he had imbibed, as well as his guest. “Say, by the way, where had you come by that ring that Bras d’Acier won from you ?”

“My ring ?” frowned Vandeilles. “Why do you ask ?”

“Because he was looking at it very closely. Indeed,

Jenkins and Mundiaz were under the impression that it was only after seeing it on your finger that he joined the game. —Well, what the devil is up now?" he exclaimed, as he saw his friend bring his glass down on the table with such violence that it flew in a thousand pieces.

"There's nothing up," answered the latter, grinding his teeth. "I was listening to you so attentively that I forgot I had that wretched glass in my hand. You were saying, then, that my ring had attracted his attention, and sure enough I seem to remember—but you spoke of two occasions—"

"As to the other," said Ribonneau, with a chuckle and a knowing wink, "it's easier to understand. When there's a woman in question—"

"Really?" interrupted Vandeilles, pouring himself two large glasses of rum, one after the other; "a woman?"

"Quite so; at the very moment when he was going to 'do it' for that ruffian of a Goliath, a woman's voice was heard calling for mercy. This time my *Braş d'Acier* looked as thoroughly fluttered as a miner dropping on a *bonanza*, and, there and then, Tom escaped the little slash he deserved so well, the wretch!"

"There was a woman among us, then?" inquired Vandeilles, whose physiognomy was twitching in a frightful manner.

"There must have been; but she can't have stayed more than a second, for— Well? What fly has stung you now?"

His friend had sprung up from the table and was at the door in three bounds.

"Vandeilles! Here! Vandeilles! There's more rum in the bottle yet! Say! Vandeilles! Why, you'll surely wait for me!"

While thus calling back his unceremonious guest, Ribonneau made a dart after him, but was at once stopped by the head-waiter, who demanded payment of the bill.

"That's all right! That's all right! I'll settle it presently," exclaimed the Frenchman; "I just want to say a word to my friend."

"Lock that street-door, you fellows," the waiter called out to his assistants. "And now, sir," he added, "our little money transaction before you leave the room, if you please!"

"What do you take us for?" cried Ribonneau, excitedly. "Here you are, here you are! Where is that bill of yours?"

The waiter walked to the breakfast table, gave a general survey around to make sure that none of the silver plate had disappeared, and, returning to his impatient customer:

"Twenty-eight dollars seventy-five cents," he said.

The money was paid forthwith and away ran the Frenchman.

Unable though he was to account for Vandeilles's sudden disappearance, he had a confused sort of an idea that he himself had made some big blunder which had something to do with it.

"Damn that breakfast! Hang that man! Devil take my tongue!" he muttered to himself, as he stepped out as fast as he could to overtake Vandeilles.

CHAPTER VI.

HAPPEN WHAT MAY!

THE large room in which Bras d'Acier, Ribonneau, and the other miners had slept was a dining-room; it had therefore to be vacated at early morn. Its occupants rolled up their rugs, bundled up their baggage in corners here and there, and went out to the town. Pablo, left by himself, sat in the recess of a window examining some papers out of his pocket-book.

At the end of a few moments, Joe half opened the door and cast a searching eye all around.

"I am alone," said Bras d'Acier, coming toward him; "come in."

"Mr. Vandeilles has just gone out," whispered the waiter, mysteriously.

"Very well," answered Pablo. "Here is the pound of gold I promised you. Wait a moment. If I have cause to believe that you have kept your tongue to yourself, right through, I shall give you the same amount when I leave town, and as much again when I come back."

"Depend on me, Bras d'Acier," said the waiter, perfectly bewildered at such generosity.

"But, on the other hand, at the least indiscretion on your part, you are a dead man!"

"You bet—"

"Here, stand in this passage for the present, and, should Mr. Vandeilles return, let me know at once."

So saying, Bras d'Acier walked down as far as Madame Vandeilles's room and stopped before the door. Twice he raised his hand to give a knock, and twice dropped it again hesitatingly. This man, so noted for his unflinching energy, stood there, trembling like a child, when the door was opened from within and Berthe stepped out on the threshold.

"Monsieur de Verrières!" she cried, moving back precipitately.

"Would you be kind enough to grant me a moment's conversation?" whispered Pablo, beseechingly.

"My husband is not here," stammered the young woman. "I dare not—"

She could not conclude her sentence through excitement, and made a movement to close the door.

"Yet I must speak to you!" he replied, sadly, respectfully.

"It cannot be; do go, I entreat you!"

"I will go if you demand it, Berthe; but, for the sake of our old friendship, let me have a few words with you, just five minutes!"

She shook her head negatively. Bras d'Acier wavered for a second; then, with a sudden resolve, he stepped into the room and shut the door after him.

Madame Vandeilles uttered a stifled cry and sank on the chair, hiding her face in her two hands.

Pablo cast a rapid glance over the bare, cheerless room.

"Poor woman!" he muttered to himself; and a tear glistened on his long eyelashes.

"Madame," said he aloud, "pardon me for forcing my way in here in spite of you. I swear on my honor that I shall leave this room as soon as you order me; but, for pity, listen to me!"

"Well?" she asked, yielding at last to the respectful entreaties of the young man. "Make haste, I beg of you: if my husband returned just now, he would kill both of us!"

"If ever he laid his hand on you in my presence—" exclaimed Pablo, with sparkling eyes.

"Yes—I know—and then, what would become of me?—But come, you said you had something to tell me."

"I have," he said, passing his hand across his forehead, as if to collect his thoughts. "You are very unhappy, Berthe?"

"You are mistaken, Monsieur de Verrières."

"I may not have said exactly what I mean—a woman is not unhappy when she does her duty—I meant to say that you have nothing left of your former wealth; nay, that you are, this very moment, far worse than that."

His lips quivered as he spoke. His voice, his look, bespoke such genuine sympathy, such fearless honesty of purpose, such careful dread of hurting the young woman's feelings, that she readily answered him with an affirmative nod.

"For two long years I have been looking for you to come to your help. The very day I heard the dreadful news that the man who had made your life a hell was not dead, as was fondly believed by all those who knew you, but had come and fetched you away on a fresh round of trials and sorrows, that day I set out after you. I had loved you, Berthe, at a time when loving you was the right of any honest heart; and now I wanted to watch over you, unknown to any one, to guard you from dangers, from starvation perhaps, to be your invisible earthly Providence, now that fate and honor denied me aught else. Unfortunately, I was not aware that Mr. de Mareuil and Mr. Vandeilles were one and the same person."

"A very natural desire to conceal our penurious condition induced my husband to assume the name Vandeilles when we started for the placers."

"That is what threw me off your track. In every direction I have crossed California for the past two years; and to this day your whereabouts were a mystery to me."

"We were in an out-of-the-way place, far distant from any frequented district, where not a human soul—my husband's peculiar temper—"

"Yes, I have heard of his jealous mania. That is how my search had been so fruitless, no doubt; and I was about resuming it in a few days, when, by the merest accident—"

He paused. Then, with visible emotion :

"How faithfully you had promised me you would never part with this ring !" he added, exhibiting the ring he had won the preceding night. "Very likely he will have demanded it from you ! Still, it was my poor mother's last keepsake I had given you there ?"

There was such depth of sorrow in the tone of his voice that Madame Vandeilles felt her heart sink within her, and it was with great difficulty she could utter the words, "Do not blame me !"

"I pain you," he continued, "and I should not do so. It is cruelly selfish of me to think of my own self. Now permit me to speak to you as a friend, as a brother. The wretched, dangerous life you lead is not the life for you, Berthe. My heart bleeds when I think of all you must have suffered in the placers. This cannot last. To be able to return to Europe, to resume in Paris a social position worthy of your family, to be happy—in a word, you need but one thing, money. Well, Berthe, in the name of the friendship you showed me during your presumed widowhood ; in the name of that love that was my life from the first moment I saw you, as pure a love, even now, as ever swelled a human heart ; for the sake of my mother who was so fond of you, grant me the bliss of contributing to your happiness. Take this sealed letter, and promise me to avail yourself of the directions it contains."

A prey to too deep an emotion to be able to formulate a reply, Berthe pushed back with her hand the envelope which the young man tendered her.

"You need not be afraid," he continued, mournfully ; "this does not oblige you to a feeling even of gratitude toward me. What I offer you, there, is God's own. It belongs to the first passer-by. This letter merely contains the necessary indications to make your way to an enormously rich placer that I discovered during my last journey. A few days will suffice Mr. Vandeilles to gather several hundred pounds of gold. I should like to accompany you at a distance, simply to watch over you and without ever intruding on your presence. Still, if the thought of my being so near at hand proved the least obstacle to your accepting this friendly gift, I have two men that I can give you as guides and traveling companions, on whom I can

implicitly rely and whose remuneration I take upon myself. All I shall ask of you is to let me know, before you sail for Europe, that you have been successful and that you are going home rich and happy. My heart's best wish will then be fulfilled ; you shall never more hear from me ; and Rosina's taunt—"

"Poor Rosina !" sobbed Berthe. "Why should I have brought sorrow to a home where I had been so fondly welcomed ! Tell me, is it really true, as I heard it, that she drowned herself ?"

"She did, in that lake by the hacienda, where we three had many a sail together."

"Oh God, oh God !" ejaculated Berthe. "What can have happened the poor child when I came away ?"

"When you first came to San Fernando," Bras d'Acier said, with a more painful expression than ever, "the people around us had almost begun to look upon Rosina and me as betrothed. Nothing of the kind existed. We had been brought up together, and loved as playmates love ; we grew up, and, for me, Rosina continued to be plain little Rosina and no more. Not so with her, it would seem. My youthful love soon vanished before the stronger feeling that your coming among us aroused within me ; hers became more intense with years. One evening we were all three taking a stroll in the forest ; you were a few paces before us ; she hung on my arm. My thoughtful gaze in your direction, the commonplace answers I gave her, seemed to strike her more than usual ; she kept on prattling of love and what not. That day the truth seems to have burst upon her ; and how often I have called to mind, since then, the gloom that came over her life from that evening forward. Just then I was summoned away, as you remember, to my mother, who lay dangerously ill. You and I parted at the door of the hacienda ; outside the gate, Rosina was awaiting me. 'Good-by, Pablo,' she said, 'may God save your mother, and forgive you the grief you have brought on me by your love for another.' I rode away with a heavy heart. My poor mother lingered for a month. Then, left alone in the world, I returned to our San Fernando property.

"'Berthe's husband was not dead, as everybody believed,' said Rosina to me, a moment after my arrival. 'His ship had been wrecked and he had been detained by

a savage tribe all this time ; but he succeeded in making his escape and came straight to San Fernando for his wife. They started for San Francisco about a fortnight ago, and from that they were to set out for the placers after two or three days.'

"In a moment, my course was clear before my mind ; and an hour later, without explaining to Rosina, as I ought to have done, perhaps, the blameless object I had in view, I was galloping away on the road to San Francisco. There I had already spent a week looking for you, when, returning to my hotel one evening, after another day's vain searching, I found old Stefano, the major domo at San Fernando. He handed me a letter ; it was in Rosina's handwriting : ' Too weak to forget, too proud to complain, I am going to seek death. Heaven forgive you, Pablo ! May she, whom you preferred to me, love you as much as poor Rosina did ! '

" ' Dead ! ' I cried.

" ' Yes,' said Stefano. ' Poor Nina's corpse has not been found yet, but vacquero Pepe saw her running headlong toward the big lake. Besides, there was a letter found on the table in her room in which she told her sister she would do away with herself, and begged of her to forward this note to you—Doña Nina was the pride and the joy of our house—her curse on you, Don Pablo ! '

"And with this he walked away. Not another word would he vouch to me ! "

A painful silence followed this narrative. Bras d'Acier's head hung on his breast ; Berthe wept.

Suddenly a noise of footsteps was heard in the passage. The poor woman startled, pale as death.

" My husband ! " she gasped.

It was a false alarm, however. A miner had left one of the neighboring rooms, and was making his way to the street door.

" I will not expose you to another such emotion," said Pablo. " Only promise me to do what I have asked you, and I shall be away."

" I cannot, Monsieur de Verrières, how could I ? How am I to account for your generosity to my husband ? How can I induce him to accept it ? "

" Tell him it is the gift of a friend who may not be much longer on this earth."

"That would be a lie."

"The day you leave San Francisco, I shall start for the Sierra de las Cosnivas."

"Do you not know that the Apaches have attacked a caravan, pillaged the baggage, burnt the wagons, murdered the men, and carried off the women and children?"

"I was told so yesterday. Perhaps I may rescue some of the unfortunates."

Berthe opened her lips, but remained speechless for a second, in a terror-stricken attitude. Somebody was running fast along the corridor.

"This time, it is he!" she said. "Heaven have mercy on us!"

On seeing the young woman's anguish, Bras d'Acier flew to the door and bolted it.

"Open the door or I smash it in!" cried a voice, hoarse with passion, from the outside.

Pablo seized his revolver and stepped in front of Berthe. She clutched his arm with the frenzy of despair.

"No!" she said. "Swear to me that, whatever happens, you will not use your arms, even to defend me! Swear it, Pablo; or by the living God I stab myself with this knife!"

"I swear it!" was the calm reply.

"Oh, you are indeed good!"

And while Vandeilles almost kicked the door off its hinges, he laid down on the bed his poniard, his machete, and his revolver, and then sat down.

"Now, may God protect us!" murmured Berthe as she opened the door.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPLANATION.

VANDEILLES had already reached the hotel before his panting friend, Ribonneau, had journeyed half the distance.

"Where are you racing to in that style, Mr. Vandeilles?" said a waiter.

"To mind my own business," he answered, without stopping.

The words had barely fallen from his lips when he noticed Joe Plum, who was in an adjacent room, give a startled look at him and immediately take to his heels down the corridor. In one bound he overtook him, thrust him head foremost into the first room that happened to be opened, locked the door, pocketed the key, and, heedless of the cries and curses of his prisoner, hurried on his way.

On reaching his room and hearing the sounds of two voices inside, he had seized his revolver with one hand while with the other he turned the knob of the door. The resistance offered by the bolt only aroused the more his suspicions and his fury, and he was wild with pent-up excitement when Berthe opened for him. He sprang into the room, rushed at Pablo, who remained quietly seated, and laid the muzzle of his revolver on his chest.

Berthe uttered a heart-rending cry and grasped her husband's arm.

"You frighten your wife, sir," said Pablo, in the softest, calmest tone of voice.

Stifling with rage and jealousy, Vandeilles grumbled some incomprehensible words and pushed back his wife so roughly that she fell on the bed. A flash passed across Pablo's features. Vandeilles thought he would spring to his feet.

"You stir and I shoot you dead!" he cried. "What business have you here in my apartment?"

"I am quite ready to answer your question," replied Bras d'Acier, still as impassive as a block of marble. "But, meanwhile, believe me, uncock your revolver—it might go off for the least cause, and it would be simply a murder—see for yourself—" and he pointed to his belt, stripped of every possible weapon of defense.

"Amédée!" exclaimed Madame Vandeilles, "in the name of Heaven, let me explain!"

"Explain—rubbish! Why was that door bolted?"

"I bolted it," answered Pablo, "in anticipation of your first outburst of passion; and you see I was not wrong."

"Why did you lay down your arms before I came in?"

"Because one of us would have been a corpse by this time. Whereas, I thought you might hesitate, perhaps, to assassinate a defenseless man."

"Well, well; but how comes it that I find you here?"

What is your business in this room?" stammered Vandeilles; while, positively bewildered by such incredible self-composure, he slowly brought down his uplifted revolver. "You, Berthe, speak out! Will you?"

"I made the acquaintance of Mr. de Verrières at the hacienda of San Fernando. He is a friend of those kind-hearted Bendigoas under whose roof I found such affectionate hospitality while you were away."

"Why did you not tell me so last night?"

"I was not aware that Mr. de Verrières and the man you spoke of as Bras d'Acier were the same person."

"But, that ring—" shouted Vandeilles, his wrath bursting out once more at the remembrance of Ribonneau's words, "that ring which you told me came from a friend of your mother's, how is it that Bras d'Acier knows it and apparently values it so much?"

"That ring belonged to my mother, sir," replied Bras d'Acier. "My mother and that of Madame de Mareuil, your wife, were brought up together in Paris."

"With all that, will you tell me, sir, what brings you here?"

Pablo took the letter he had vainly pressed on Berthe, and handed it to him. He tore it open and ran through its contents.

"Is that mine so rich as all that?" he exclaimed, yielding at once to that dazzled fascination, which those alone can realize who have been at the placers.

"It is the richest I have ever found. One single stroke of my barreta brought me a nugget, eleven pound weight."

Vandeilles's eyes glistened; but almost immediately a feeling of shame seized him for having so readily betrayed his cupidity,

"Still, this fails to explain your presence here," he continued.

"I never sell my placers, you cannot but know it," said Pablo. "I always make a free gift of them to any deserving miners that cross my path. Do you think it extraordinary that the idea should have struck me to do for a countrywoman, for the daughter of the friend of my beloved mother, what I do every day of my life for utter strangers?"

"We are not in trouble, that I am aware of, and we don't need anybody's alms," dryly replied Vandeilles, in

whose mind pride, jealousy, and the thirst of gold struggled madly for the mastery.

"Did you not lose your very last dollar last night? Besides, I give you nothing. I simply enable you to gather a treasure which the first passer-by has a perfect right to take."

"And what do you ask in return for this precious information?"

"Have you ever heard that Bras d'Acier demanded payment for a service?"

This time Pablo's tone of voice was as full of noble pride as that of his questioner had been haughty. A moment's silence followed.

"And who would be our guide?" inquired Vandeilles, suspecting that his visitor would at once offer himself.

"The plan drawn in that letter and the indications it contains are such that you need no guide."

"You would—"

"I am off to the Sierra de las Cosnivas to-morrow."

"But my wife and I could not undertake such a journey by ourselves; nor, above all, could we manage the gold digging alone,"

"Take two or three miners with you."

"From among your friends, no doubt?"

"Take whoever you like; but, if you are wise, you will be careful in your choice."

As he was finishing these words, Ribonneau burst into the room like a madman.

"Well, what's the matter?" growled Vandeilles. "What do you want?"

"What I want? Why—nothing at all."

And, in truth, the Provençal hardly knew what he wanted himself, stupefied as he was at the quiet attitude of the two individuals that he would have expected to find strangling each other, if together at all.

"Fact is—I thought—" he continued, "you left me so abruptly, I— Why, good morning, Bras d'Acier, how are you?"

Vandeilles seized the opportunity, and, while his countryman sought refuge from his embarrassment in a commonplace talk with the *gambusino*, he stepped over to his wife, and for a few moments conversed with her in a low tone.

Maddened by the golden glitter of the nuggets that Bras d'Acier had just spread out before his mind's eyes, the gambler would fain lull his instinctive jealousy asleep, as well as conciliate his pride with his burning desire to acquire the wealth he saw within his grasp. As to the first of these sentiments, his young wife's candid replies were such that he soon felt convinced he had acted as a lunatic, and that his conduct toward her had no common sense in it. For the rest, he was so weak and at the same time so violent, he flew so easily from one extreme to the other, that he could never take a calm decision without seeking somebody else's advice and trying to justify himself in his own eyes.

"I must consult Ribonneau," he whispered at last ; then, turning to Bras d'Acier : "May I speak of this to my friend ?" he asked.

"Of course you may," said Pablo. "The secret is henceforth your property ; you may do what you choose with it. Nay more, should you wish to spare yourself the fatigues and dangers inseparable from such an undertaking and start for Europe at once, I authorize you to sell this vein to any one you like."

"We should have to find a purchaser, first of all."

"By to-night, sir, you shall have fifty offers for one, with the written directions I have given you."

"What could we get for it ?"

"I hardly know ; thirty or forty thousand dollars, perhaps."

"That's very little, compared to the treasures you spoke of a while ago. Should we have to wait till spring-time before we could start ?"

"No. The crestones happen to be quite sheltered from the floods. And then, as one of the veins lies almost on a level with the ground, a mere accident, unlikely though it be, might disclose its existence to some chance *gambusino*."

"Our rights would be anterior to his !" exclaimed Vandeilles, who already began to consider, as his own property, the placer he had barely accepted. "And before anything else, Bras d'Acier, I should like to lay certain conditions with you—"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the latter, while putting back on his belt the arms he had thrown on the bed, "you singularly misrepresent our respective parts. If either of

us had conditions to impose on the other, *I* might have, not *you* ! For I am hereby giving you the means of acquiring a fortune, and I ask nothing in return, not even your thanks, not even your silent gratitude. Good-morning, gentlemen ! ”

He took his hat, and made a respectful bow to Berthe, while Ribonneau swallowed with avidity the explanations he would fain have obtained all at once from Vandeilles.

Berthe's hand was held out to the young man ; he pressed it one last time, and made a step toward the door.

“ Say, here, wait a minute, Bras d'Acier ! ” cried the Provençal. “ Vandeilles is telling me things here—why, we have a thousand questions to ask you. ”

“ In one hour's time, ” said Pablo, “ I shall be back at the hotel. If you need any further details from me, I shall be in the parlor. ”

And, bowing once more to Berthe, he saluted the two men with that icy politeness so characteristic of him, and slowly walked out of the room.

“ Come, what the devil do you mean with your hesitation ? ” asked Ribonneau, as soon as Bras d'Acier had closed the door.

“ Come out for a walk with me, ” said Vandeilles ; “ I'll tell you all about it. ”

They strolled down by the quays ; and, with more or less accuracy, the scene just enacted was related to Ribonneau.

Now completely recovered from his copious libations, and already put on the right scent by the incident at breakfast time, he managed to guess a great deal of what was kept from him. But at the mines, more still than anywhere else, personal interest is the first of all considerations, and the perspective of the famous placer could not fail to exercise its influence on the mind of the Provençal. His friend's apparent hesitation should be quashed at any cost, and to this he devoted his best endeavors. Readily, indeed, did Vandeilles yield to his forcible demonstration that his evil-minded suspicions were absurd to a degree ; and the acceptance of Bras d'Acier's secret was agreed on without much difficulty. But Ribonneau aimed further still, and insisted on Bras d'Acier being asked, even as a favor, to consent to bring them, himself, right on to the placer. Vandeilles, in his heart, wished it as earnestly as Ribonneau,

but his pride made him resist his friend's appeals for a long time. At last the necessity of the *gambusino's* help was so plainly put before his eyes that he needs gave away. And, this last point settled, the two friends returned to the hotel, already building castles in the air on the foundations of their future treasures.

Ribonneau relieved his friend of the task,—an impossible one for him,—of going to Bras d'Acier with a request that he might be kind enough to accompany them.

"Wait for me in your room," said he to his companion. "As soon as I have broached the question in my name, I'll bring our man round to you for the clinching of the nail."

"What if I went with you?"

"So that we might be watched and overheard perhaps, by the fellows that will be there?" said the Provençal, with a shrug of his shoulders. "When Bras d'Acier does talk with a man, then, if ever, walls have ears, you bet! Take my advice, it's far better we should have our chat in your apartment, unless your cursed tomfoolery again about your wife—"

"I swear that's not it; but I am afraid this Bras d'Acier owes me a grudge for that fit of passion of mine."

"What, that man! I lay you any wager you like, you and your bluster are a thousand miles away from his mind this instant. Go in, and in five minutes I'll be back with him."

Vandeilles obeyed, and told his wife of the project now in hand. She prepared to leave the room, but our repentant sinner was so proud of himself that he ordered her to remain for the interview.

Presently Pablo appeared, externally cold and calm as ever, in spite of the storm raging within him. Much to Ribonneau's disappointment he had seemed in no way disposed to accept his proposal.

On learning his almost positive refusal, Vandeilles now became the more anxious to wrench his consent.

Without any reserve he now added his solicitations to those of Ribonneau to induce Pablo to alter his plans. Was there ever a man so determined to go leave his scalp, maybe, with the Apaches! Twice or three times both of them turned to Berthe and blamed her for not helping them in the discussion; but her heart was full to bursting.

Apart from the feelings no woman could refrain from at the thought of the thousand deaths to which Pablo would run, the very next day,—too well she understood and appreciated the reticence of the noble creature who stood before her. A word from her lips, one look, and she knew he would have ignored all possible obstacles in his pursuance of the task he had marked out for himself, in her case, in the sight of heaven. Pablo read in her eyes, or thought he read,—and by degrees his objections seemed to become weaker. Ribonneau, who placed the enemy's apparent yielding to the credit of his flood of eloquence, now redoubled his efforts; and, on a last appeal from Vandeilles, Bras d'Acier at length agreed to what was asked of him.

The various measures to be adopted for the success of the undertaking, and the number of persons who should join the party, were at once taken into consideration.

This last question, one of the weightiest, filled up no less than a couple of hours. It was evident that Vandeilles and Ribonneau could not, by themselves, undergo all the labor necessary to the extraction of the gold; but the admission of associates, while increasing their chances of success, had the great inconvenience of diminishing the share of each one. After a long and serious discussion, the following was adopted on Bras d'Acier's proposal. The secret of the placer being Vandeilles's own property, he took as working partners Ribonneau, Mundiaz, José Guerino, and Craddle, the latter of whom owed his nickname to his skill in cradling the gold. Vandeilles reserved to himself one half of the produce and the other half was to be divided among his four associates. In addition, and with a view to secure the services of the latter to the very end, Pablo undertook, when the first expedition would be terminated, to indicate another placer to them, for their own exclusive benefit. As to their consent, not even a doubt was entertained, and they would not be spoken to on the subject until two or three days before the date of starting.

All being thus arranged, Pablo and Ribonneau took leave of Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles. In the overflowing of his joy, the Provençal was well-nigh letting loose some indiscreet comments on the pleasant prospects of—A look from Pablo

froze the words on his lips, and he inwardly registered an oath that never again would he forget himself on this side of the grave.

As to Vandeilles, there was something wanting still to the cup of happiness that had so unexpectedly been proffered to his lips. He had absolutely nothing wherewith to purchase the necessaries for his journey, or even to pay his hotel bill. Great was his trouble in this connection, when a fortuitous event (to which Bras d'Acier was probably not altogether a stranger) came opportunely to his rescue.

"How did you come to hear of it?" he gruffly asked Patrick O'Loughlin, who approached him mysteriously one day, and begged of him "by all above and below" to take him out along with him.

"Sure, in the old country, sir," he replied, with a wink, "by dint of striving to bamboozle the ferrets, wouldn't any omadhawn pick up some of their ways in the long run?"

Monsieur Vandeilles was utterly ignorant of the ways of Dublin Castle ferrets in general, or of the Irish events of '48 in particular, and a plump refusal was his first answer; but the Irishman's offer of \$1000 in cash, and on the spot, fell much more readily within his comprehension; he had, moreover, heard of Patsy Green as a brave heart and true; and that same evening the latter attended, with his future partners, the secret meeting held in Vandeilles's room.

Not without a sigh of envy was Vandeilles's large share of the proceeds mentioned to the other five miners. But Bras d'Acier's word was an oracle for them, and his promise of a second placer for themselves, in the event of the first failing to satisfy them, removed any hesitation they might have experienced. Each man signed the contract of agreement which Vandeilles had drawn under Pablo's direction, and the party was now definitely composed of seven persons: Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles, Ribonneau, O'Loughlin, Mundiaz, José Guerino, and Craddle. An oath was taken to keep secret all that had been said or done concerning the association, and it was agreed they should start on the following Monday, thus allowing five days for the various purchases and preparations.

CHAPTER VIII.

THROUGH TRACKLESS PLAINS AND TANGLED WOODS.

AS is frequently the case in such circumstances, the preparing for the start took up more time than had been anticipated. The placer lay in a distant, almost unknown district, near which no *pueblo*, no *rancheria* would be found. In addition to the tents and the tools needed for the working of the vein, the little caravan should take away a stock of provisions sufficient for three or four months ; and who that has not been on an expedition of this kind can know the importance of the most trifling item in the hundred and one little nothings that are so bitterly missed outside the pale of civilization !

Though apparently unconcerned with these various details, Pablo looked after them in secret with as much forethought as activity. Indeed, there was scarce anything that he did not see to through the medium of Patsy Green, whose good points he had very soon appreciated. Stimulated by him, the good Irishman had instituted himself the *factotum* of the caravan, and was heartily, if not very effectively, seconded by José, who was still but a convalescent.

The tool department had been voted to Craddle ; Vandilles and Mundiaz, who had been once a vacquero, were to look after the horses and the mules ; as to Ribonneau, who had been intrusted with the victualing of the troop, he was so thoroughly engaged in minding everybody else's business that he left his own to the kind attention of Patsy Green and José.

When everything was almost ready, Bras d'Acier left San Francisco to go reconnoiter the road and at the same time to give rise to the belief that he was off again on his far-away wanderings. Three days after, he met his future companions in a solitary spot a couple of miles outside the town ; and all being now reported in order, it was agreed they should start forty-eight hours later, a little before sunrise. A new rendezvous was appointed, to which Pablo advised his friends to repair in separate groups.

"If you leave town all together," he said, "the coinci-

dence may arouse suspicions, and other miners may follow you. Two roads lead to the spot I have just named to you. Let Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles, O'Loughlin, and José take the easier, which follows the river, and let Craddle, Mundiaz, and Ribonneau come by the pine forest and travel a little quicker, so as to reach the Juanito peñon at the same time as they. Indeed, with a view to attract still less attention, you three," he added, pointing to the three last named, "would do well to move from your hotel this very day and take lodgings on the outskirts of the town."

The wise suggestion was adopted and the meeting broke up cautiously, Craddle and Patsy alone remaining with Pablo. Anxious to give one last look at their purchases, he returned to town with them after dark. Then, while Craddle was finally sorting into suitable bundles, to be loaded on a mule's back, the cradles and the sieves and the bowls, the shovels, pick-axes, and other mining implements, he took the Irishman to an armorer's store.

"You can handle a gun, Patsy?" inquired Bras d'Acier.

"The Lord bless you, sir! Can it be you were never in Tipperary?" ejaculated Patsy, with a wink; and many a long year after, he used to boast that, for once, Pablo had positively smiled.

Meanwhile he was carefully scrutinizing the weapons in the store, and, after trying several, he laid aside a Colt revolver, a double-barreled gun, a bowie-knife, and a poniard whose blade measured eight or nine inches in length. He paid the enormous price of eight hundred dollars without a word, merely stipulating that the two firearms should be taken to pieces and examined before his eyes; and when this was done:

"Here, O'Loughlin," he said, "it is for you I have bought these. Here, friend, take them, they are really yours," he added, seeing the poor fellow standing still, with staring eyes and gaping mouth.

Precious as it is in any country, a trusty weapon is a priceless treasure in California. Patsy Green knew it and could scarce believe his eyes or his ears.

"What, all that for me!" he repeated; "for me, the broth of a boy of poor old widow O'Loughlin (the Lord have mercy on her soul)!"

"Yes, of course," said Pablo, "and this too." And he

handed him a large cartridge pouch of splendid make and well filled with ammunition.

This proved a climax for Patsy ; he had commenced stammering his thanks ; but this last gift, like the last drop that overflows the cup, fairly nonplussed him ; and by way of a safety-valve for his pent-up feelings he launched forth the opening lines of " Who fears to speak of '98 " with such stentorian vigor that the windows of the store rattled. It would have needed considerably more than the outpourings of any pair of human lungs to collect a crowd in the streets of San Francisco. Yet, Bras d'Acier was desirous to preserve his incognito. He therefore hastened to conclude the purchase of a short Mexican poniard and another revolver, the lightest and handsomest he could find, and beckoning to his exuberant companion to moderate himself, he walked out.

The Irishman followed him into the street and up the river a certain distance out of town, playing, the while, with every movable part of his revolver and his gun, like a child with a new play toy.

" The devil a happier man did I ever feel in all my born days ! " he exclaimed at last. " Bras d'Acier, what can I ever do to pay you back for all this ? "

" I will tell you, " was the answer. " Listen ! That lady who is to come to the mines with us is the daughter of an old friend of my dear mother's. I have the greatest affection for her. I feel for her as a devoted brother. As I believe you to be a trustworthy fellow, I am going to put her in your charge all the time of the journey. No matter what may happen, never leave her, and never look after anything or anybody but her. If God so wills it that the poor woman should come back to San Francisco safe and sound, you shall be provided for, for life, Patsy ; and I have no need to tell you, perhaps, if my word—"

" Oh, begor, sorrow a bit of an oath you need take over it ! " interrupted Patsy ; " sure, a heart of stone would feel for the dear creature, let alone now that I know what she is to you. By my conscience you may depend on me, Bras d'Acier ; there ! "

" I do, then, " replied Pablo. " One word more : you are not to let a living soul know, not even Madame Vandailles herself, that I have placed her in your keeping. "

Patsy Green promised ; and soon after, warmly shaking the hand of the man who had made him so happy, he retraced his steps toward the town, lavishing on the midnight air every Irish tune that passed through his mind, from "The Shan van vocht" to "Finnigan's Wake," and taking aim in the dark at anything that looked like a horse, a mule or a tree, so as to get familiar with his gun.

The possession of these arms and the trust that Bras d'Acier reposed in him filled him with such delight that "the devil a wink of sleep he had, any more than a weasel"; and he was up and astir again by three o'clock in the morning. Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles had been even more weasel-like than he, it would seem, for he found them, at that hour, tightening the "very last" strap. Joe Plum, who had been told, over-night, of their intended departure, let them out quietly, and the three started on their venturesome journey.

When they had gone a short distance beyond the last houses,—or better, the last tents of the town,—Vandeilles gave a peculiar whistle ; it was immediately answered, and the next moment José Guerino appeared on the road, riding a horse and leading three others by the bridle.

"Craddle, Mundiaz, and Ribonneau are off already," he said. "They took away the two mules with all the baggage ; their road is longer than ours ; yet they said they'd get there before us so as to have the fire lit and something for us to eat."

"And good luck to it, it looks as if the rain had altered its mind," remarked Patsy Green, far more concerned about the temperature for the sake of his new weapons than for himself.

And to his great relief the rain kept away the whole of this first day's journey to the meeting place. Both he and his Mexican mate, incessantly questioned by Vandeilles, beguiled the hours with the most marvelous accounts of Bras d'Acier's exploits, with tales based on real facts of course, but glossed over (as is always the case) to exaggeration by the very enthusiasm that the unvarnished truth excited of itself.

Thanks to that instinctive coquetry bestowed by nature on the most modest of women, on the one least desirous to seek admiration, Berthe had managed to give a look of gracefulness and elegance to the coarse garments she wore.

A large-brimmed felt hat protected her face against the sun or the rain. Her beautiful dark hair curled down on a tight-fitting jacket of brown cloth; and a divided skirt of the same material tapered away into the depths of high Cordovan riding-boots. The costume, if not of the latest *mode*, suited her to perfection.

Vandeilles, it has been said, had taken upon himself the purchasing of the horses, and it must be confessed he had been fairly successful. The mare ridden by his wife, in particular, did not strike one at first as possessing any remarkable "points," so far as beauty was concerned; but her amble was so easy, her head so light in the rider's hand, she obeyed so promptly, so safely, that Madame Vandeilles had not finished her second mile ere the thought struck her, accustomed to horses as she was, that Pablo might have had something to do with the discovery of so perfect a mount.

Patsy Green, faithful to his mission, was riding by her side.

"Really, I must say that my husband has had a lucky hand with his horses," she remarked aloud. "My Rita is well worth the eighty piastres he paid for her!"

Her Irish friend was just then frantically attempting to whistle "Nora Creina" to himself, so as to keep himself from smiling, and feigned to believe she was addressing José who happened to be right away behind her.

"Don't you think so?" she added more pointedly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, ma'm," he stammered, "a lucky hand? True for you, ma'm—I believe you, ma'm!"

And recovering from his embarrassment Patsy watched Berthe with the corner of his eye; and he felt as if every fond stroke she gave her beautiful steed was "gliding down the back of his own neck."

As a matter of fact, he himself had handed a twenty-dollar bill to a horse dealer so that he should go and offer this particular mare to Vandeilles for a hundred piastres. And it was Pablo who, a couple of hours before this transaction, had bought the animal from a ranchero at the then exorbitant price of three hundred piastres.

On reaching the rendezvous, they found their vanguard encamped in the ruins of an abandoned posada, and their supper almost ready waiting for them.

"Did you see Bras d'Acier?" inquired Vandeilles.

"Yes," replied Mundiaz, "he was here before us. But he started off again as soon as we had shaken hands, to go and see if the horses will be able to get across the river at the mangrove-tree ford, or if we shall have to go all round the forest. He promised to be back before sunrise. Look here! see those splendid trout that Craddle seems to be devouring already; it was Bras d'Acier gave them to us!"

With their implicit faith in the skill of their leader, and free from the faintest doubt regarding their future prospects, our travelers could not fail to do ample justice to their first supper together. A blanket or two, kept in position with a few heavy stones, were made to roof the bare walls of the former posada, and the meal was merrily dispatched.

With the exception of Vandeilles, and perhaps of Ribonneau, all the miners belonged to a class of people whose manners are naturally rough and vulgar. Still, such was the influence exercised over them by a young, handsome woman, whose every act proclaimed her worthy of respect, that all were full of kindly attentions for Berthe and were at loss to give her enough tokens of friendly interest. Even Craddle,—“as selfish a Yankee as ever ate a trout,” as Mundiaz described him,—even Craddle stood up several times from his supper to see to “that darned fire,” for fear “the little lady” might catch cold.

Owing to her terrible emotions for the past few days Berthe was now in that particular state of mind in which human sensitiveness, being at its utmost tension, bursts out for the most trifling causes, and the behavior toward her of those men, so coarse and unsocial among themselves, often filled her eyes with tears.

Presently the inner portion of the ruins, that had just been used as a dining-room, was left to Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles, and the others retired to rest, each man according to his own taste, Mundiaz and Patsy Green undertaking to mount guard and keep up the fire, one after the other, for this night.

The Irishman had just relieved Mundiaz and was philosophically cramming his pipe, at the same time kicking a half-burning stump here and a fresh log there into the center of the fire, when, along the bridle path, the quick and steady step of Bras d'Acier struck his ear, and a moment

after the creole appeared within the circle of reddish light thrown out by the flame.

He sat down by the side of Patsy and heard the careful, if not scholarly, report of all that had taken place since he had last seen him. Thus far, all was for the best.

A few hours later, at the first break of dawn, after a substantial breakfast of cold mutton and tea, our travelers fastened their rugs in front of their saddles and set out in the direction of Feather's River.

No great fatigue were they exposed to, at first; but as they pushed higher and higher up, along the banks of the Sacramento, the road became more and more difficult. Peñons, or steep, wood-clad hills, often obliged the party to take long detours. In other places, especially in low-lying districts, the heavy falls of rain and the overflow of various small streams transformed whole valleys into huge lakes, where the horses sank breast-deep into the saturated soil. At times even, the banks of the river being altogether impracticable, they needs had to give them a wide berth and cut their way through dense, trackless forests in a veritable maze of gigantic trees, entangled with climbing plants and thorny shrubs.

Bras d'Acier always journeyed on ahead, at a certain distance in front of his companions, and indicated the road they had to follow by means of those numerous signs familiar to sportsmen. Now, it was the branches of several trees in a row, broken and turned in the same direction; another time, it was a succession of small pieces of wood planted in the ground right across an endless plain, or again perhaps, it might be a notch made in a special way in the bark of a tree which, by its dimensions or its solitary position, was sure to attract attention.

The two Mexicans and Patsy Green, familiar with the life of the Wild West, had no difficulty in deciphering the hieroglyphs of their guide, and with such valuable indications the little caravan proceeded boldly forward.

When Bras d'Acier found a suitable spot for the evening halt, he would light a large fire and await his friends, while roasting whatever game he might have brought down in the course of the day. Pheasants, partridges, and wild pigeons; hares, geese, and ducks; or sometimes even a quarter of a deer afforded a succulent meal to the tired party, and

enabled them to spare the provisions they had brought from San Francisco. Now and again, while the saddles were being taken off the horses and mules, Pablo would take a fishing-rod. Craddle and Mundiaz would be on his track forthwith, and all three would quickly return with a varied supply of fresh water fish, in which salmon-trout played a conspicuous part.

When the game was duly roasted and the fish sufficiently fried, the burning embers were carried a little farther away, and the original fire-place became the scene of the banqueting. Tea was the favorite beverage, though not without the addition, on the part of the men, of a considerable amount of rum or brandy. Supper over, a chat followed, one pipe of tobacco succeeded another, and Craddle or Mundiaz might spin out some digger's tale or other. Generally, however, the travelers were too tired to stay up very long. As soon as sleep began to make itself be felt, Madame Vandeilles's tent was pitched on the patch of ground that had been well dried up by the fire; and according to the state of the temperature the men erected another tent for themselves, or, merely wrapping themselves in their rugs, they composed themselves to sleep around the camp fire, their heads resting on their saddles, always excepting the man whose turn it was to mount guard.

At peep of day, frequently even before, the watchman awoke his companions. Straightway each one made for the nearest brook, went through the process of a primitive toilet, and took his share of a breakfast of cold meat and tea. Then the tents were folded up, horses and mules were saddled and loaded, and away they started on the track already laid out for them by Bras d'Acier, who had preceded them by two or three hours.

As may be seen, Pablo's companions were traveling as regular sybarites; and very different indeed was this expedition from any they had ever joined before. Bras d'Acier left no stone unturned to spare the least fatigue, the smallest privation, to the woman whose ultimate welfare he had made the task of his life. She, with her previous experience of life on the gold path, was in a position to duly appreciate the relative comfort for which she was indebted to his ingenious and unceasing care.

In truth, Bras d'Acier must have had no trifling propor-

tion of steel in his constitution to be able to withstand the fatigues he imposed upon himself. Sleeping barely a few hours every night, always going on foot, and continually obliged to retrace his steps to select the better of several roads and to indicate it to his followers, he still found time and energy enough to make an occasional dive of two or three miles into the forests after a head of game.

Berthe thought it her duty, on several occasions, to remonstrate with him on his utter neglect of himself and to endeavor to check his reckless devotion ; his only answer was that sad, subdued smile which alone ever brightened his lips ; and the next morning he would set out at the very same hour to expose himself to the same fatigues.

"What a strange body !" said Vandeilles one morning, when Pablo's untiring self-denial was regretfully commented upon by the other miners at the breakfast table, "singular man !—If he could only get us a few pheasants like those he fetched home the night before last, what an addition they would be to our bill of fare this evening !"

CHAPTER IX.

MISFORTUNES NEVER COME SINGLY.

ALTHOUGH, on this particular evening, they had halted long before sunset, so as to have a long rest before attempting the steep ascent of the Rinalto the following day, the shades of night had crept over the valley for more than an hour before Bras d'Acier reappeared among them. He carried on his shoulder a shapeless mass, reeking with blood and covered with a dark, rugged hide.

"Damn my eyes," cried Craddle, who boasted the precious advantage of being able to swear in three or four different languages, "it's the bump of a bison he has got there ! What a glorious totemada we are going to have !"

"And in the morning our little lady will have such a breakfast as she never tasted before, not even in Europe," added José Guerino. "Now then, Ribonneau, turn up your sleeves, you lazy fellow."

The Provençal had just stretched himself by the fire for

the night ; but at the mention of the prospective feast he scrambled to his feet and joined Patsy Green and José, who, knife in hand, were digging a hole in the ground some three feet in length and about the same in width and depth.

"Come along with me, Vandeilles," said Mundiaz, "we'll go and fetch them some wood."

Meanwhile, Ribonneau gave his companions the benefit of so many hunting anecdotes and culinary tips that their task was completed before he had used any other tool than his tongue. Patsy, good-natured and well disposed for everybody, took no notice of his idleness, but José, who was not overfond of work himself, rather liked a little help.

"Look here, Ribonneau," he called out, wiping his forehead, "if you would do a little less talking, and hand us the wood that Mundiaz has just pitched there !"

He did so, and the hole was soon filled with brambles, awaiting the orders of *chef* Craddle, who was now dressing the bump with the aromatic herbs, also brought home by Bras d'Acier.

"Say, Bras d'Acier, did you kill your bison in one go ?" he asked, the creole having come and seated himself on the trunk of a tree within a few paces of him.

"What makes you ask ?"

"Why, we only heard one shot of your gun. Were there many of them ?"

"Two or three hundred."

"And this one was knocked over straight off—well, that's mighty strange, those brutes are so hard-lived. Hallo, you are wounded, are you, Bras d'Acier ?"

"A mere scratch," answered the latter, quickly rolling his cloak around his left arm. "I had to finish the animal with my machete, and he tore my arm slightly with his horns."

"Why the devil did you not load again, or use your pistols ?"

"Because it was time I should strike," said Pablo, with an accent in his voice which made the American shudder.

Berthe was approaching to see the proceedings. In the movement that the creole made to wrap up his arm she noticed the blood with which his sleeve was soaked.

"You have been hurt !" she cried, advancing toward him in fear and trembling.

"Nothing to speak of."

"Let me see," she replied, seizing his arm in her two hands.

"It is indeed a mere nothing, I assure you."

But such as it was, Madame Vandeilles insisted on judging of it with her own eyes, and then, with her own hands, she should lay a dressing of oregano, pounded between two stones, on the torn and gaping muscles of his forearm.

"Well, Berthe, are you coming to see how a totemada is done?" cried her husband to her.

How it was done under such conditions may be explained in a very few words.

The hole dug by Patsy and José had been filled with a blazing fire, and, over it, had been laid some wide flat stones, which fell one by one to the bottom according as the branches which supported them were consumed and gave way beneath them.

When the antediluvian oven had been sufficiently heated the live embers were all removed, and on the burning stones was laid the bison's bump, wrapped up in its skin, with its accompaniment of aromatic plants. Over it was spread a layer of hot cinders, on this the live embers were placed, and the whole was covered over with green twigs, the interstices of which were carefully stopped up with moistened clay.

This operation being terminated, to the long hours of night was left the task of completing the cooking of the delicious tidbit, which tantalized Craddle in his dreams till the morning guard aroused the camp.

Truth to tell, the first thought of our *gourmands* was to look for Bras d'Acier, whom they had entreated to remain for the famous breakfast. To their genuine disappointment he had started, at his usual hour, on his scouting errand.

And now, when the bison's bump was withdrawn from under the cinders, it was in such a state of carbonization that Vandeilles and Ribonneau exclaimed it was utterly spoilt.

"That shows what you know about the matter, strangers," said Craddle. "You try and keep patient for a minute or two."

And, unmindful of external appearances, the American

ripped up the black, scorched skin, and underneath it, appeared a pink, savory joint of meat.

He was turning a look of triumph toward his astonished "strangers" when two shots were fired from behind the neighboring trees, one bullet piercing Vandeilles's hat through and through, the other striking José in the shoulder, though inflicting but a slight wound.

In a moment the miners had clutched their guns and were away in the direction of their assailants. Patsy Green's first impulse was to rush off with his friends, but, a slave to the promise he had given Pablo, he walked back and stood still, his eye and his ear on the alert, by the side of the young woman, whose alarm at this unexpected occurrence may well be imagined. In about an hour's time, the party returned without having found or seen anything save the imprints on the ground of heavy iron-nailed shoes, apparently those of Europeans.

Vandeilles had run on so far ahead that he had lost his way in the labyrinth of the jungles; indeed, he might perhaps never have found his companions again, if Patsy Green had not been thoughtful enough to fire a shot now and again to let him know where they were.

He had not been back more than a few minutes when Bras d'Acier appeared on the scene.

"What has taken place?" he asked, casting an anxious survey all around him.

"We have been fired upon," said Vandeilles, "and a bullet went through my hat"; and as he added these last words, his fiery eye seemed as though it would fain pierce into Pablo's inmost soul. But the latter's countenance was so clear, seemed so far above suspicion, that the Frenchman felt ashamed of the evil thought that had flashed across his mind.

He hastened to tell Bras d'Acier all they knew of the aggression. Then Mundiaz led him, silent and thoughtful, to the spot whence the shots had come and where they had discovered the footprints.

"That was done by the two Goliaths," said Bras d'Acier, when he returned to the encampment.

"Did you ever see their feet?" asked Craddle.

"Once only, the night we were lying on the floor at the Star Hotel; but Tom's foot is easily recognized."

"How the deuce have they come to follow our steps?" inquired Ribonneau.

"I am rather inclined to fear *we* may be going on their track, and perhaps with the same object in perspective."

"What!" burst out Vandeilles. "Could they possibly have heard of the placer?"

"I do not believe they know the exact lay of the mine, but they might have certain notions of its existence. The placer was first revealed to me by a poor wretch of a Mexican whom I found, two months ago, lying on the point of death at the bottom of a ravine. Two bullets had struck him in the breast. While I leaned over the poor fellow to make him swallow a little rum, he stretched his finger in the direction of a neighboring peñon and stammered a few words I was unable to understand. The rum, however, having temporarily revived him, he told me how, the day before, at a distance of a couple of miles from where we were, he had come across some rather large pepitas, the sharp edges of which had convinced him that the vein was close by. He had no tools with him; so he ran back to his tent for some, as well as to acquaint his only companion with his happy discovery. He had scarce finished when two robbers fired upon them. His mate fell dead on the spot. As for Juanito (this was the unfortunate man's name), though grievously wounded he managed to escape; but in his flight he was hit by a second bullet. Then, exhausted from loss of blood and by his swift running, he somehow had stumbled along the steep slope of the peñon, helplessly rolled down and rebounded from rock to rock to the bottom of the ravine. Ten minutes after my meeting him he expired in my arms."

"Well," said Ribonneau, "I hardly see in all that what can have told the ruffians about the existence of the placer."

"You see, the nuggets found by Juanito happened to be in his companion's hands at the time of the attack. The *salteadores* got possession of them, of course; and they, naturally, must have made the same comments upon them as poor Juanito had made, and derived the same conclusions from them."

"If so, why did they not remain on the spot?"

"As to that," remarked Mundiaz, "they may not have

been able to find out the vein; or they may have been short either of provisions or of working utensils. And in any case, if the job was done by the Goliaths, the first thing the cursed scoundrels did was to run to the nearest town and spend to the last dollar's worth of what they had stolen."

"Of course, I cannot be sure," added Pablo, "but I know not why I feel ever so inclined to charge the Goliaths with this double-murder. By the way, do try and find the bullets that were shot at you a while ago."

"Here you are, this is mine," said José, opening a carefully-folded little paper parcel out of which he drew a large-sized bullet.

Pablo produced from his cartridge pouch the little leather bag that had already made a public appearance on the eventful night at the San Francisco hotel, and took out of it two bullets which he placed on each side of José's.

"Did any of you ever happen to take notice of the two Goliaths' firearms?" he asked, after a moment's examination. "Could anybody tell me if the rifles of both of them have the same bore?"

"Devil a bit!" quickly answered Patsy. "Philip's is smaller than his brother's. Eight bullets to the pound at the very most is the smallest that Tom's bore'll take, I'll go bail!"

"Then the bullet that struck José probably came from Philip's rifle—as did this one," added he, exhibiting one of the two bullets he had brought in his bag; "they are positively identical. As to this other—which I extracted out of poor Juanito's corpse,—this large one, it must have been Tom's. If we could only find Mr. Vandeilles's bullet! I feel certain it was Tom who fired on you, sir."

All set about looking for the missile, but it had probably gone much farther into the wood; their searching was of no avail.

"This unlucky business won't prevent us going on, I hope?" said Craddle inquiringly.

"I guess not!" exclaimed each of the miners, as though with one voice.

"The only difference is that henceforth we must be more watchful than ever," said Pablo, "and never go away from each other. Two of us will keep scouting, a very short

distance ahead of the others, all the day ; and at night the very strictest watch is to be kept. And let me not forget to recommend the man on guard to keep, as much as possible, right out of the circle of light of the fire, and not expose himself to be aimed at as safely as in broad noon-day."

And from now, accordingly, our travelers journeyed on with the utmost caution.

In the prairies they pushed on boldly enough, as the eye could reach far and wide ; but as soon as they came to defiles and woods—and these they avoided as much as they could—every one dismounted and used his horse as a moving rampart. Mundíaz, O'Loughlin, Craddle, and José, who knew more of backwoods life than the French people, usually scouted in turns. The soil, the lower branches of trees, the stalks of shrubs, were the objects of a minute and continual examination. A broken reed, a plant crushed by the passing of a deer or a coyote—everything was, or might be, for them an index worthy of immediate attention.

On the morning that followed the alarming incident just related, Bras d'Acier's absence at starting time, though a daily occurrence, was felt the more by the miners, as his protection now seemed the more necessary to the little caravan ; to Berthe it was more poignant than ever, as she thought of the increased dangers he now ran single-handed thought of the unswerving obstinacy with which he pursued the line of conduct his sense of honor traced out before him ; thought also of the requital,—rougher hearts around her had been stung by it, why would not hers ?—the unjust return her husband made him for it all.

As a matter of fact, they had just entered a narrow defile, flanked on either side with hills that were covered with large trees and an inextricable network of brushwood and climbers. The ground, thoroughly soaked with rain, gave way every moment beneath the feet of the travelers. Many a pool they dared not venture into before sounding them with long poles, which the scouts carried for the very purpose. Mundíaz and Ribonneau were riding ahead ; a few paces behind came Craddle and Vandeilles, incessantly on the *qui vive*, and their rifles ready cocked.

Suddenly Patsy Green, who faithfully kept close to Madame Vandeilles, thought he heard the crackling of

broken branches, a distance of some fifty paces on his right. Softly he glided his horse's bridle around his arm so as to have the free use of his two hands, and kept in readiness to shoulder his gun, while his eye steadily watched the almost imperceptible waving of the summits of the underwood under the action of some invisible moving body. Vandeilles, who had an eye in every direction, was not long in detecting the fixedness of the Irishman's look or in finding out the mysterious cause of his anxiety. In an instant, with his usual impetuosity, he was off in that direction, and, seizing the moment when the shaking of the branches indicated in a more precise manner the whereabouts of the unknown foe, he took aim, at a guess, and fired. A formidable growl followed the detonation and made the bravest of the miners turn pale, as the crushing of the thicket now sounded nearer and nearer under the frantic leaps of some wild animal.

"Damn your eyes !" cried Craddle. "You have brought a grizzly down on us !"

As he finished these words, the head of an enormous bear was seen above a clump of cactuses, and the next second he was rushing down on the little caravan, clapping his jaws together with such force that they could be heard fifty paces away. What rendered the position more critical was the terror shown by the horses. They snorted in an almost uncontrollable panic and did their utmost to run away. The miners, obliged to use all their endeavors to master their steeds, saw the moment when they could make no possible use of their firearms against their terrible foe. Closer and closer he was drawing ; barely thirty paces separated him from the little group ; Ribonneau sent him a bullet full in the chest, which, however, only seemed to increase his speed. Patsy now leveled his gun at him with much more self-possession ; but just as he pulled the trigger Madame Vandeilles's mare, whose bridle he had passed round his arm, reared and shied so violently that she snapped the bridle and galloped away with her rider in the direction of the torrent in spite of all the efforts of the Irishman, who had grasped her halter and heroically let himself be dragged over the stones without letting his hold go.

After a temporary hesitation, the bear suddenly turned round and directed his course in the same way. Vandeilles ran forward to stop him. José, weak and wounded as he

was, resolutely threw himself in his way and fired on him almost at arm's length. The grizzly roared with pain, snatched the gun from José's hands, smashed it in the twinkling of an eye, and pursued his mad career despite the shots with which he was assailed. Barely ten paces now separated him from Madame Vandeilles, whose mare had just fallen to the ground. Berthe seized the revolver Pablo had given her, and, pale and speechless, by the side of the now unconscious guardian to whom he had intrusted her, she bravely awaited the almost inevitable death which threatened her.

Too far behind, henceforth, to be able to cross the bear's path, Mundiaz, Vandeilles, and Craddle discharged their rifles on him ; but their bullets, like José's, only exasperated the infuriated brute the more.

Berthe could already feel its burning breath. Lo ! a shot is heard from the other side of the torrent ; the grizzly, struck between the eye and the ear, rends the air with its frantic yells, and halts, as if dazed, for a second. Another bullet now strikes him below the shoulder-blade, and on the same instant a man is seen clearing the torrent with one prodigious bound and throwing himself between the bear and Madame Vandeilles, who seemed in a fainting condition.

"Pablo !" was the glad shout of the miners.

But a deathlike silence immediately ensued ; the grizzly had grappled with Bras d'Acier.

Patsy Green, recovering his senses, flew to his rescue.

"Patsy," he gasped, "I order you to go to Madame Vandeilles's help."

And with all the strength he could muster he plunged his poniard deep into the chest of the bear, whose giant arms already hugged him round the neck. Unfortunately, in consequence of the movement he had just made to speak to the Irishman, he was awkwardly placed to strike. His poniard glided on one of the animal's ribs. Goaded beyond all description, the bear gave a mighty lurch forward and firmly held his aggressor beneath him in his fall.

A cry of terror escaped all the beholders. Patsy Green, who had barely had time to bring Madame Vandeilles twelve or fifteen paces away, now took aim at the grizzly in the wildest trepidation. Almost instantaneously one bullet,

from the opposite bank of the stream, grazed his uplifted arm, and another, striking the barrel of his gun, sent his own bullet whizzing right away over the trees. With a shriek of desperation Patsy dropped his useless weapon, seized his revolver, and threw himself on the brute now writhing in agonies. Berthe sprang after him, and with incredible courage she laid her pistol against the very ear of the terrible beast and fired at the same time as the Irishman. He uttered one last howl, raised himself a few inches from the ground, then fell heavily back again; he was dead.

With the help of Craddle and José, O'Loughlin and the courageous woman succeeded in moving the corpse of the monster, under which they expected to find Pablo. To their inexpressible astonishment he had disappeared; his poniard, buried to the hilt in the grizzly's heart, was there, alone, to tell of his plucky fight. As the struggle had taken place within a couple of feet of the torrent over the brink of which the very head of the bear was now hanging, Patsy's first thought was to scan the foamy waters that rolled between those rocky banks.

"Monsieur de Verrières!" Berthe loudly called.

And Patsy felt she might have rushed to the torrent below, had he not kept her back.

"For God's sake, ma'm, be easy, will you?" he would go on repeating to her, although, despite his usual self-possession, he himself was beginning to lose his head in his vain endeavors to descry Pablo.

Immediately on hearing the shots fired at O'Loughlin, while Bras d'Acier lay under the bear, Mundiaz and the two Frenchmen had started off in the direction whence they came. Craddle and José were scouring the two banks of the torrent in opposite directions; their gestures, the cries they exchanged at intervals, told but too plainly how unsuccessful was their search for the *gambusino*.

Left alone with her faithful guard, it now seemed as though Berthe would break down at last under the crushing weight of so many emotions. Incoherent words came out of her quivering lips. The good Irishman shuddered as the thought forced itself upon him that she was losing her mind. He prayed her to sit down; she did so, and almost instantly sank altogether to the ground. The poor, broken-

hearted creature who lay there might have been thought to be dead but for the tremor of her lips, so pale were her cheeks, so drawn her handsome features. He leaned over to the torrent, and bringing up some water in the hollow of his hand, he threw it on her face.

The contact of the ice-cold liquid seemed to revive her. She suddenly started up on her feet.

"Come," she said, "come along ! We must find them ! We must find him !"

And so saying, she grasped his arm with an energy that no woman, apparently as weak as she was, could be expected to possess, and dragged him along through the wood down the stream.

In the mean time, Mundiaz, Vandeilles, and Ribonneau had plunged into the forest after their mysterious aggressors. Thanks to Mundiaz, a more experienced *rastreador* than the rest, they pushed on with comparative celerity. At last, in a particularly damp spot, a series of clearly outlined footprints was discovered ; with very little hesitation Mundiaz recognized them.

"Bras d'Acier was right," he whispered ; "those wretches are the Goliaths !"

The chase continued ; but at the end of a quarter of an hour they lost all possible traces.

A kind of clearing now presenting itself, to which three different paths had been trampled down by the wild beasts, the three explorers held a council. It was agreed that each of them would take one of the tracks and examine it minutely, and that as soon as he had found any traces he would return to the clearing and there await the others. And, when on the scent again, all three would start together once more after the murderers.

One of the tracks went straight into the thicket. Mundiaz took it without any choosing or picking, and away went Vandeilles and Ribonneau down the other two.

About an hour after they had parted, the discharge of a gun was heard. The two Frenchmen, who had discovered absolutely nothing, immediately retraced their steps to the appointed meeting-place, and finding no sign of the Mexican, hastened on his footsteps into the jungle. They had tramped on for about a mile when they came to a second

clearing, wider than the former, and surrounded with tall Californian cypress trees. Vandeilles, casting his eyes around, suddenly perceived the body of Mundiaz lying across their path on the opposite side of the clearing. Both ran over to him. Mundiaz was a corpse. A bullet, shot from behind him, had shattered his spinal cord.

They dug a grave with their bowie-knives for their unfortunate comrade, and covered it over with branches and stones, so as to protect it against the wild animals.

"And now what shall we do?" asked Vandeilles.

"Hang me if I know," replied Ribonneau. "Still I dare say it would not be a bad thing to go back to the camp."

"Let us try first if we could not find out some little thing about the ruffians," suggested Vandeilles.

But the night was falling. Tracking a beast or a man became more and more difficult; they had to give up the attempt, and think of making their way back to their companions.

Not five hundred paces had they walked when they heard a gunshot, immediately followed by another. It seemed incredible; yet the shots seemed to come from the very clearing they had just left; back they ran with all possible speed, but not a soul was to be seen.

Despite the increasing darkness, however, they easily ascertained the passage through the underwood of two or three individuals. Traces of blood could also be seen distinctly in two different parts of the clearing.

The first impulse of both men was to follow up the new track they had found; but the obscurity, which grew more intense every moment, positively forbade them such a course. They felt compelled to retrace their steps toward their friends, nor was it without difficulty they contrived to do so.

Foremost among the questions, with which they were assailed on their return, was the anxious inquiry as to whether they knew anything of Pablo.

"Nothing at all," said Vandeilles, "unless it was he who fired the two shots we heard in the wood. When we left you, that brute of a grizzly was hugging him so tight I hardly thought but we'd surely find him here on our return."

A murmur of loathing impatience at Vandeilles' callousness preluded to more outspoken comments on the part of

the miners, when the dried leaves along a by-path were heard crackling under a human foot.

All arms were hurriedly grasped.

"It is I," said Pablo, in his quiet way.

And in an instant, as though in answer to the anxious look he cast around, Patsy Green, Berthe, José Guerino, all clustered around him, all save one, but the absence of Mundiaz seemed to cause him no surprise.

Urged on every side with heartfelt questioning, he at once accounted for his disappearance and its subsequent events.

"As I lay there under the grizzly," he began, "I heard the two gunshots. The thought flashed across my mind that if the Goliaths believed that I was dead they would be less likely to run away immediately after firing. Just then, the bear having slightly raised himself, I slipped away from under him, crept along the ground among the tall grass down to the torrent and swam across. The opposite bank is so thick with shrubs that I could land easily without being seen, and I immediately started on a long detour so as to take the Goliaths between you and me. Unfortunately they were far away already. As I was almost stepping out into the clearing where you found Mundiaz, I saw the poor fellow stooping, apparently to examine a footprint on the grass. Just then a bullet, shot from the top of a tree, struck him in the middle of his back; he fell flat on the ground, stark dead. Hoping that his murderer would come down, if for nothing else to rob him of his gun, I remained concealed in the thicket. Presently both of you appeared at the opposite side of the clearing, and somebody up in the tree made a movement, no doubt to shoulder his gun. The noise and the shaking of the branches told me of his whereabouts. I wanted to have a better view, however, and moved slightly to the left; but in doing so I started a hare, and the attention of the Goliaths was thus drawn in my direction; they guessed the presence of an enemy and did not stir. I waited for some time after you had gone away; they still kept motionless, and I now felt sure that they were aware of my presence. After vainly trying to get a glimpse of them through the foliage and then fire at a guess I made up my mind to show myself. As I had foreseen, the one who was nearest to me fired on me instantly. The

flame of his shot showed me where he was. I fired immediately, and saw Philip tumble from branch to branch, his fall being ultimately broken by a clump of mimosas. Almost as quickly Tom glided safely down, took his brother on his shoulders and ran away."

"And you did not run after them?" asked Craddle.

"I did, but was unable to overtake them."

"Then you were wounded!" said José, drawing nearer to the creole. "Eh! *Caramba!* Of course you are wounded, Don Pablo; what is that?"

And he pointed to what seemed to be the swelling of a bandage a couple of inches above Bras d'Acier's knee.

Yes, Philip's bullet had struck him there, but as usual, it was "a mere nothing."

What wound could have been "something" in the *gambusino's* eyes, short of the one whose consequences would have made such a change in "her" future prospects?

And before next sunrise he had resumed his tramp. He returned to his companions, however, somewhat earlier than was his wont. He looked anxious and unusually pensive.

"Did you find the track of the Goliaths?" inquired Vandeilles.

"How is your knee, Monsieur de Verrières?" asked Berthe simultaneously.

"My knee is almost well, I thank you, madam. I did find the track, sir; I followed it for a considerable distance, and it led me to another which gives me a good deal of anxious thought. We have a band of several persons ahead of us."

"White people or Indians?" inquired Craddle.

"White people. They are on horseback. I made out the footprints of three men and two women. There may be more, of course."

"Which way are they going?"

"The same direction as we are going. I should say they spent the night right here, where we are now, and only left this spot this morning. We must now proceed with more caution than ever, until we find out who they are."

"What if we made a detour, to avoid them?" suggested Ribonneau.

"That we cannot possibly do," replied Pablo; "the track we are now following is the only practicable one."

"Well," Vandeilles tried to say philosophically, "after all, they may be gold-seekers, just like ourselves."

"Quite so," said Bras d'Acier; "but, on the gold path a man must always be on his guard. He may fall among *salteadores* or bushrangers at any hour of the day. The valley in which we are now engaged affords special facilities for ambushes; we must, therefore, be continually on the alert."

Whereupon the creole threw his rifle over his shoulder and started off, after whispering a few words with Patsy Green. Shortly after, the little caravan was continuing its journey onward.

PART II.

CHAPTER X.

UNLOOKED FOR MEETINGS.

THE travelers mentioned by Bras d'Acier to his companions were, as a matter of fact, about five miles away from them.

During the afternoon of the day when Pablo had encountered the grizzly and chased the Goliaths, two women were sitting in the sun before a hut hurriedly built up with bamboos and wide leaves. One of them, a beauteous creature of some nineteen summers at most, seemed gifted with all those alluring charms that nature has lavished on the creole woman, and of which the Lima woman in particular affords so perfect a type. Petite and graceful, slender and supple, like a reed, you might have encircled her waist within your ten fingers. Her long lashes, darker still than her luxuriant head of hair, could not quench the flame that darted from behind the velvet of her large eyes.

Very elegant, and equally ill-suited to the necessities of a journey through the Wild West, her costume, bereft as it was of its original freshness, offered a singular contrast to the surroundings of the young woman.

By her side a baby slept. He might have been a couple of years old. She had just laid him down on his little bed of grass, and, to shelter him from the sun, she had hung her black silk rebozo over his head.

A rosary, with gold-incrusted ebony beads, was rolled around her small, plump wrist.

With her left hand she held a mandolina, and now and then mechanically drew forth some sounds from it. But her thoughtful expression told but too plainly how far her mind was from the play of her fingers. Presently she threw

her instrument aside, nervously grasped her rosary, and began to pray.

The other woman, who lay stretched on the grass like a snake in the sun, lazily arose and came toward her.

"Are you ill, Doña Rosina?"

"No, Cypriana."

"There is something troubling you?"

"No."

"Still—"

"I have a mind to cry," interrupted Rosina, impatiently, "and I cry—there!"

Cypriana shrugged her shoulders and knelt by the side of the young woman, who had buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Cypriana had mixed blood in her veins. The golden tinge in her complexion, her burning eyes, her purple lips, her voice, her every movement bespoke her birth.

A mere attendant on Rosina at the first start, she had soon become her companion and at times her confidante.

She continued to serve her, but only as if it were by way of a kindness, and through regard for her weaker constitution.

"Is it because Benito is away that you are sad?" she asked, as she closely watched her mistress.

Rosina made no reply.

"He'll be back presently," she continued.

"That is not what is making me cry," murmured Rosina.

"You are always thinking of Don Pablo?"

"I am, my poor girl,—alas!"

"You love him still, then?"

"I know not; but when I think of him I cannot help the tears bursting from my eyes."

"Why do you not go back to the hacienda at San Fernando?"

"Benito would never consent, and I would not if he ever did. He would kill me rather than take me home. Home? How could I ever face my father, my mother, I—the wife of a half-caste—the wife of a *capataz* of my father's?"

"You must have been madly fond of your Benito," continued Cypriana, apparently determined to get some information out of her mistress.

"I! Merciful God! Ah, if you but knew, my poor Cypriana!"

"What, señora?"

There are times when the most reserved woman feels the want of sharing with another the secret that weighs upon her breast. The creole especially, with her ardent and expansive nature, can seldom live without a confidante.

Rosina cast upon her attendant that undecided look of one who hesitates on the threshold of an unpleasant confession.

"Well, señora?" repeated the china.

"Well, my poor girl, you must know—"

The gallop of several horses coming toward them interrupted her.

"Here is Benito!" she said, with a singular mixture of fear and interest.

"And Domingo, too!" exclaimed Cypriana, springing to her feet. "Let us see what they are bringing back!"

Almost immediately four horsemen appeared on the clearing. One of them, who seemed to be their chief, wore a dolman of silk-embroidered cloth and wide calzoneras adorned with shining buttons. His high riding boots of yellow leather were mounted with enormous spurs, the rowels of which were not less than two or three inches in diameter. Beneath his wide-brimmed hat clustered a very forest of dark hair. A newly-landed European might have failed to note any difference between him and the first sun-burnt white man he might have seen; one single glance would have sufficed a creole to detect his mixed parentage.

He rode a very fine horse, which he handled with remarkable skill, and made him caracole on his way with the evident intention of attracting the young woman's attention.

The noble animal, taken away barely eight or ten days before from a herd of wild horses, had not become used yet to the bit or the spur, and now and then he would stand upright on his hind legs, then plunge and kick furiously,—vain outbursts of his rebellious spirit, soon checked by the master, who sat motionless on his back.

The three men who followed him, led, or rather dragged after them, a wild horse, that still had around his neck the lasso with which he had been captured.

A bozal, or long hair rope, was tightly knotted around the prisoner's upper lip, and by means of this they compelled him to follow the horses. The latter foamed; their sinewy limbs reeked with sweat.

"Fasten that fellow to a tree," said the first horseman. "I shall break him by and by."

So saying, he dismounted; took off the saddle and bridle, which he laid on the ground; then, putting fetters on his steed, he let him wander about and graze in the wood.

"Well, dear soul of my wife," said he, sitting down near Rosina, "you should indeed have come with us! What a splendid herd of horses we met! That fool of Domingo, with his tongue always rattling, missed a magnificent stallion, fit for a king!"

And as he spoke he put his arms around the young woman. He felt her instinctively shrink away from his embrace. In an instant his brows were knitted and his face assumed an expression of terrific wrath.

"*Caramba!*" he cried, "is that the way I am received? Look at me in the face, Rosina. You have been crying again—By the blood of—" and he vented his passion on the trunk of a neighboring tree, which he madly lashed with his *cuarta*.

"Am I denied even the right of crying now?" she asked, raising up her head with a haughty look.

"You are!" he answered angrily. "For I can guess too easily the motive of your tears; you still keep on thinking of that young man at San Fernando. Oh, the cursed creole! I would give ten years of my life to have him in my hands just for a couple of hours. I would tear the skin off his body, scrap by scrap! I'd scourge and plow his carcass with my *cuarta* until it would be a heap of bleeding jelly!"

And the bark of the unfortunate tree flew in fragments under his whip.

Frightened at this fit of rage, but too proud to let her terror be seen, Rosina boldly sustained the wild glances of the *capataz*, and a smile of defiance wandered along her upturned lip.

"You dare sneer at me!" he cried, in a fresh outburst of fury. "I tell you I'll crush him like a worm, your cursed

white! *He* won't look at me in the two eyes, the villain! the coward!—"

Rosina listened to these and other invectives of a coarser nature, and merely answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Yes, he is a coward!" repeated Benito. "His arm would tremble if we were ever face to face, machete in hand!"

"He is a brave heart," said she with emphasis. "There is not a man in this world he would be afraid of."

"*Voto a Dios!*" howled the *capataz*. "You dare say that to me, in my face; to me who would hash you to pieces with one lash of this *cuarta!*"

At the movement he made to raise his whip the young woman was up in a bound, her eyes glistening, her nostrils dilated:

"You mongrel!" she cried, meeting his gaze with an unflinching stare, "you dare touch me, and I plunge this *navaja* in my heart!"

Rosina was truly beautiful to behold as she stood there, the embodiment of haughty disdain and reckless defiance, the point of her poniard pressed on her heaving breast.

Benito stepped back; he seemed to contemplate her with a sort of admiration, and his rage suddenly melted away.

With a violent jerk he cast his *cuarta* far from him. Then, ashamed of his violent temper, he crossed his arms over his chest and stood still, his eyes riveted to the soil.

Rosina let herself sink to the ground and covered her face with her two hands with a gesture of despair. The next moment she felt them gently drawn aside. It was Benito who knelt by her side.

"Forgive me, dear soul of my life," he said to her, with unfeigned emotion. "Forgive me, Rosina, my beloved! I have pained you. But it was not my heart that spoke. Jealousy drove me mad. I know that you loved another man—that even now you love him still, perhaps. Every time I see you cry I begin to think you are crying for him; I am wrong! Say I am! It is your father and mother, your friends you are thinking of."

Rosina's sighs interrupted him; and the sight of her grief made him turn his anger against himself the more.

"Rosina, my love," he continued, "do forget what I have said! It is your indifference that maddens me. Here, take

this navaja, bury it in me, if you are still angry with me; but do look at me ! Tell me it was not of him you were thinking—was it, Rosina ? Rosina ? ”

She answered not a word.

“ Tell me at least, then, that you love him no more, that you love none but me, who would lay my hands under your feet and cherish and worship you like an angel from heaven—Rosina ! ” he cried, his passion rising once more. “ You shall love me ! do you hear ? You shall ! I have a right to your love. After all, am I not the father of your child ? ”

“ And do you dare remind me of it ? And whom do you take me for ! ” said the young woman, turning toward her husband, her face bathed with tears and suffused with a burning blush. “ I must love you, you say ? Is it by force a man can get the love of a heart like mine ? Again, what do you take me for ? I have often told you, Benito, whenever you come to me with threats on your lips and demand a love from me which I never freely promised you, you may kill me if so you choose, but force me to love you—never ! Believe me, Benito, that is not the way you will make me forget the crime you committed the day when your accursed priest put your ring on the hand of poor demented Rosina, helpless and alone on her bed of sorrow ! ”

The anger of the half-caste vanished once more. With that impetuosity, that variableness of impressions and gestures so common to the impassioned races of the South, he cast himself again at Rosina’s knees ; he rolled himself on the ground at her feet, entreating her to forgive him and to love him.

There was in the man so much genuine passion, wild and unreasoned though it was, that Rosina was moved by his prayers and his despair.

“ Get up, Benito, ” said she, holding her hand to him. “ Perhaps I ought to ask you to forgive me, in my turn. I pain you ; but it is your fault, you see. I have moments of despondency when I must cry. Why should you keep on asking me why I cry ? My reasons, if I gave them to you, would make things only worse. Why, above all, should you threaten me ? You cannot but know it in your heart, I would rather face death than comply with your commands ! ”

These last words seemed to allude to previous scenes of this kind, which must have well-nigh ended more tragically than this one, for Benito hung his head with shame.

"You are right," he said, "I am a madman; but I love you so much that I cannot bear the thought of sharing your heart with another. Oh, I must indeed love you—did you but know—to let you master me as you do. Any other woman, see here—any other woman would have been long since crushed between my fingers, just like this bit of glass!" and he crushed to atoms one of the beads on his toquilla.

"I know you love me," replied the young woman, "and I am thankful for your attentions to me. God is a witness that I should like to love you—but—"

"Well?"

"The remembrance of those awful weeks and months, of my frightful awakening—"

"Hush!" he cried, placing his hand across her lips, "hush! Rosina, let the past be buried! I beseech you! Talk of the future!"

Rosina sighed and involuntarily cast a glance around her.

"Oh, I know," he continued, "that our present position is not very bright. But you shall see, when we get to the land of gold, what treasures I shall gather for you. We shall be rich! We shall go and settle in Mexico, in Lima, wherever you like! You shall have carriages and horses harnessed with gold and silver. We shall give the grandest fêtes in the country."

"Who will come to them?" murmured Rosina, almost in spite of herself.

"Who will? Everybody will! I will cover myself from head to foot with gold, so as to hide the little mixed blood that still flows in my veins. Look, Rosina, twenty years of my life would I give for one pint of pure blood like your own! You would love me then, in spite of all the past, perhaps, and our life would not be the hell it now is!"

He started as he finished these words, and seemed to listen to a distant sound.

"What is it?" asked Rosina.

"I'll tell you by and by! Meanwhile, keep on talking right aloud and naturally, as if I was still with you."

So saying he reached over to his lasso, stretched him-

self flat on the ground, and noiselessly glided away into the underwood like a veritable reptile.

Rosina, surprised at his sudden disappearance, looked around to seek the cause of it. Some thirty or forty paces away, close to the border of the forest, a man was creeping along the grass. She saw him draw closer and closer to the three horses of Benito's companions, which were nibbling the shoots of the young trees. Then, suddenly seizing a bridle and hurriedly putting it on one of them, he sprang on his back, when, like a flash of lightning, a lasso whirled around his body and his two arms. In vain he spurred the horse onward and stiffened his every muscle against the terrible clasp of the lasso; an irresistible twitch brought him to the ground, and before he could stand up again Benito had bounded upon him and knelt on his throat.

In the twinkling of an eye, the *capataz* had garroted him in such a way as to make it impossible for him to offer the slightest resistance. This operation being performed with all the skill of a practiced hand, he took his navaja and pressed the point of it on the chest of the thief.

"Now then, who are you? And what is your business here?"

The prisoner, who was no other than our old acquaintance Tom Smithson, only answered with a growl, accompanied with a violent jerk; but the lasso held him as tight as ever.

"Ah, that's the way with you, is it?" cried Benito. "Well, I'll answer for you. You are a ruffian and a thief! you were coming to steal my horses, and by my holy patron you'll never steal another!"

"Mercy! Mercy!" shouted Tom, who felt the navaja penetrating his flesh.

"None for you!"

"Mercy, I say, and to pay you back I'll give you a fortune!"

"A fortune! Where would you steal it from, you Yankee cur?"

Goliath hesitated a moment; but seeing Benito raising his terrible navaja, he hastily gasped out:

"I know a bonanza,—a wonderful bonanza; I'll bring you to it!"

The eyes of the *capataz* flashed fire. He shrugged his shoulders, but his fervid imagination already spread out heaps of gold before him.

"That's a made-up story, just to save your life!" he said.

"I give you my oath—"

"Well then, speak out. Where is your bonanza? What direction is it in? How did you come to know of it? Out with it, and don't try to deceive me; for, by the soul of my father, the first lie you tell me, my knife will be down your throat!"

"Well," said Tom, with every appearance of truthfulness, "the mine is ten or twelve days' journey from here at most. I was told of it by a miner that I came across a few months ago. He had been wounded to death."

"How?"

"Some riding accident," answered Tom, with a little faltering in his voice. "Before he died the poor devil told me of his discovery and showed me several pepitas he had found in a torrent. You could easily see by their sharp edges they had not traveled very far."

"Say," interrupted Benito, who seemed to have been looking at his prisoner very attentively as he spoke, "mightn't your name be Smithson, by any chance, eh? Mightn't you be one of those Americans that go by the name of Goliath among the miners?"

Much as he regretted the leaking out of his identity, the giant muttered an affirmative reply.

"How the devil can I believe your oath, then?" retorted Benito, with a frown. "It's very likely one of your traps you want to draw us into!"

"I swear—"

"The swearing of one of your sort!"

"See here, I'll remain with you all the time. If I have told you a lie, you can do what you like with me. And you'll have my brother Philip, too, as a hostage; and a safe one *he* will be—he is wounded."

"Where is he?"

"Close by, here in the wood; it is for him I wanted a horse."

"Is that true?"

"It is, I tell you! I carried him nearly eight miles on my shoulders."

"You were running away, then?"

"Yes," answered Tom angrily. "My brother has got a really bad wound."

Benito thereupon asked him various questions about the bonanza, to which he gave pretty satisfactory replies.

"We must push on to it, as fast as we can," said Goliath.

"Why so?"

"We have a gang of miners behind us, who look to me as if they were going straight for my bonanza."

"Do you know them?"

"Don't I? I have been tracking them this fortnight. It's their leader, that fellow 'Bras d'Acier' (hang him!), who shot my brother."

"Bras d'Acier!" exclaimed Benito, who, like everybody else, had heard of the famous *gambusino*

"The very man, señor! He has escaped me twice; but, by all the powers in hell let him look out for the third go!"

"We must keep on ahead of them."

"That will be very hard. If we make haste, they'll soon notice it, and they'll manage to get on before us."

"Nonsense!"

"No nonsense at all! There is not a man alive in California, this moment, knows the forest tracks or the mountain paths like that cursed Bras d'Acier. What should be done would be to try and keep him behind us, or, better still, prevent him going a step farther."

"How could we do that?"

"Well, there may be a way, perhaps."

"What is it?"

"I'll think about it and tell you; but, for God's sake, let me go back to my poor brother. He must think I have been killed or made prisoner. You come and help me to fetch him here. Going along, I'll tell you my idea."

Benito tried to ascertain where his three late companions were. He was unable to see them, but he could hear their loud laugh and merriment, and soon found them. Seated around a blazing fire, they were toasting slices of *cecina* and eating them voraciously. Cypriana was with them, taking her share of the banquet and of the conversation. As to Rosina, she had remained by the side of her child on the clearing. Benito could not see her.

"Ramon," he called to one of the men, "come over here!"

The vacquero stood up, adjusted his belt, and complied with the request.

Benito then loosened very slightly the knots of the lasso, so that Goliath should be able, not to run, but to walk along.

"Now lead us on," he said to him, "and remember that, at the first suspicion, I bury my knife between your ribs. You, Ramon, keep your eye on him, and if he makes a single attempt at running, shoot him down like a dog!"

One hour later, Ramon was seen coming back to the clearing at a trot; he called Domingo to him and whispered a few words in his ear; then both saddled their horses, put a few slices of *cecina* and a little corn in their saddlebags, and mounted.

"Where are you going, Domingo?" cried Cypriana.

Ramon beckoned him to say nothing.

"We are going to see the little fishes fly and the birdies swim," shouted Domingo in answer. "But don't be uneasy, *preciosita de mi alma*; I'll soon be back."

And both men rode away.

It was night when Benito returned. He was accompanied by Tom and Philip. The latter walked with difficulty, leaning on his brother's arm; Tom even carried him from time to time.

Next morning, when they continued their journey, Ramon and Domingo had not come back yet.

Philip was hoisted on the easiest horse. Tom Smithson proposed to walk along by the side of his brother, but Benito hindered him.

"Your footprints will surely betray us," he said.

"You are right," replied the giant; "well, give me a horse then."

And he got astride a luckless animal who bent under his weight, and he rode close to Philip.

Despite the difficulties of the road, thirty miles were covered that day. Darkness alone stopped the eager wayfarers.

"Benito," said Goliath, when they halted, "it is very likely that this morning Bras d'Acier will have tried to find traces of my brother and myself. He may have guessed that I joined you, and he may have followed us. It might be as well, perhaps, if we did not stop with you to-night, or at least near the same fire."

"Why so?"

"Because he is most likely to come and lurk around the encampment."

"Well?"

"Then, he'll try to capture us, my brother and me."

"We'll defend you."

"They are more than we are: and besides, you are two men short. And again, seeing me with you, Bras d'Acier might suspect that I am bringing you to the bonanza."

"So—quite so—but, if I leave you two out of my sight—"

"Yes, we look like fellows that would run away, don't we? And you could not catch us up easily, of course, if we were such fools! Don't you see the state Philip is in? And how the devil do you think I could work the mine by myself?"

"Very well, very well. I'll send you some food by Pepe Nieto, when it is ready, and he'll stay with you for the night. Meanwhile, come and pick out your camping place, that I may know where to find you to-morrow morning."

And he went into the wood with the two brothers.

Nieto and Cypriana set about getting supper ready. As to Rosina, she paced up and down the edge of the clearing with singular agitation. A prey to an unaccountable presentiment (who is there that never experienced that mysterious, painfully persistent sensation of the coming of an unknown something?)—the young woman could not keep in the one place.

Just at the moment when she had once more reached the extreme verge of the little piazza she had crossed and re-crossed, the blaze of the distant fire cast a faint glimmer on the face of a man issuing from the thicket.

Two stifled cries of surprise and joy were uttered at the same time.

"Pablo!" gasped the young woman.

"Rosina!" faltered the creole, who scarce dared believe his own eyes.

He clasped her in his arms with delight.

"Heaven be thanked!" he said at last. "You are alive!"

Too deeply moved to be able to speak, the young woman stood still, her head resting on Bras d'Acier's breast. He led her softly to a kind of natural seat formed by the roots of a huge tree, and sat by her side.

"How happy I am to see you again!" he said to her. "The thought of your death embittered my life. How often I have wept, thinking of you!"

"You speak true, Pablo?" asked Rosina, fixing her beautiful dark eyes on his.

"Do you doubt me, Rosina?"

"You still have some little affection for me, then?"

"Why, of course, Rosina; a very true, a very deep affection. But tell me, what became of you these years? What was the meaning of that letter which caused me such grief—and all those details suggestive of some suicidal act—and your poor people at home—"

"My people believe me dead, Pablo."

"I know that; and did you never let them know the joyful truth?"

"Not yet, friend. I have not felt that I could yet—I shall tell you all, later on. But you yourself, Pablo, how come you to be here?"

"I have been traveling all over California for the past three years."

"And with what motive? Are you really that man that I heard of so often, and that they call Bras d'Acier?"

A nod from Pablo told Rosina her heart had not deceived her.

"I had guessed it," she continued. "Who but you would have been capable of those noble deeds of bravery and generosity that have so often been related in my hearing? What or whom were you looking for, all through the mine districts? How altered you look, Pablo!"

And Pablo's "plain little Rosina" of other days drew aside with her tiny fingers the dark curls which half covered his forehead.

"Those three years have made you ten years older," she went on. "And yet, you are still the same—the same dark hair, the same eyes so soft and so proud—Do tell me, how did you happen to come across my path?"

"By mere chance."

"By mere chance?"

"Yes, Rosina. In very truth, how could I possibly anticipate such a meeting as this? For, what on earth can have brought you, Rosina, to this desert spot, in the middle of this forest? You are not by yourself, of course?"

"I am not," she said, hanging her head to hide a blush. "There are several with me. They are there, preparing supper."

"Who are they?"

"You will know all, later on," she murmured. And, unable to brave the painful thoughts he had summoned to her mind, she buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

Although what Pablo felt toward the young creole could not be termed love, he had always kept a feeling of genuine affection for the companion of his youth. To this affection was to be added the particular kind of—shall we say "gratitude?"—which a woman's love inspires to the man who is the object of it. Again, the sense of his apparent guilt toward her, the many pangs that her supposed death had caused him, everything now combined to stir him to his inmost soul on behalf of Rosina. Deeply affected by her grief, he took her hands affectionately and asked her the cause of her tears.

Rosina made him a sign that she could not answer.

"Tell me, at least, if you are unhappy, and if I can do anything to console you or to lessen your trouble!"

She kept on crying, and only answered Pablo's suggestions with nods of dissent. At last, yielding to the impulse of her passionate nature, she flung her arms around his neck:

"Take me away, Pablo!" she ejaculated. "For the love of heaven take me away from here!"

As he opened his lips to reply, the baby, who had awakened from its little bed of grass and had instinctively found where its mother sat, came tottering to her lap. She uttered a cry and took the child in her arms. Then after gazing on him with such an expression on her countenance as no pen could describe, she kissed him. So sudden, so violent was her embrace that the baby began to cry.

"Whose child is that?" asked Pablo, who had stood up at the approach of the little stranger.

"Mine," said she with downcast eyes.

"Yours, Rosina? You are married, then?"

Rosina grew pale. It seemed as though a cold dagger had been plunged in her heart.

"What has become of Berthe de Mareuil?" she asked

abruptly, darting a piercing glance at the young man. "Have you found her yet?"

It was now Pablo's turn to hesitate in his reply; but another sudden change in Rosina's features attracted his attention. She had just seen Benito, on the opposite side of the fire, some fifty paces away at most.

"What is the matter?" he asked, perceiving her frightened look.

"It's Benito," she murmured with faltering voice. "See, coming yonder—"

"Who is that?"

Rosina made no reply; but her eye rested on the baby in her arms and from him went up to the creole with an appealing expression of untold grief and shame, truly heart-rending.

"The child's father?" he asked.

She nodded "yes"; then as though dreading a further ordeal:

"Ask me no more, Pablo," she prayed. "Pity me; have pity on me, for I am indeed wretched!"

"Does he ill-treat you?"

"Not at all, he is very kind to me, but—I have not time to tell you all that to-day—see, here he comes toward us—some other time perhaps—as for to-day, I beseech you do not look as if you knew me. Let him never know you were at San Fernando—"

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you now. Do not give him your real name, either. That may be a useless precaution, perhaps; still I pray you to do as I say!"

"What grievance could he have against me?"

"You will know all, some day; but for pity, do not say you know me. Find out some excuse for your being here. Say that—I really know not what—my poor brain is giving way. But, have an excuse ready!"

One second later, Benito stood before them, his eyes peering gloomily from under his eyebrows, his features contracted.

"Who is that man?" he asked, addressing Rosina. "What does he want?"

"That *man* is a *caballero*, señor," was Bras d'Acier's haughty, yet calm reply.

Benito shrugged his shoulders.

"What are you looking for here?"

"I am looking for two murderers."

"*Capa de Dios*, señor, is that meant as an insult?" exclaimed the *capataz*, clutching the handle of his machete.

"Not in the least. I am not alluding either to you or to yours. I speak of two American scoundrels."

"I have no Americans in my band."

"Still—"

"Besides, who are you?"

"They call me Bras d'Acier."

"Indeed!" said Benito with a look of surprise; for, judging by the exploits related of the famous *gambusino*, he expected to see a very different man from the slender-built creole before him. "And what did those men do to you that you are looking for?"

"They murdered one of my companions and have fired several times on myself."

"Well, I have no knowledge of them. I have never seen them."

"Still, I followed their traces to your very last encampment."

"They may have come there after we left."

Pablo shook his head with an air of doubt.

"How many persons have you with you?" he inquired.

"Three men and two women."

"Where are the men?"

"One of them is there, near the fire you see yonder between the trees. The others are picking wood in the forest for the night. Their horses are grazing close by."

"I have strong reasons to believe that those Americans have joined you, so strong indeed that I must see for myself if —"

"Would you dare doubt the word of a *caballero* like me?" exclaimed Benito, who thought it easier to sustain a quarrel than an explanation. "If my word is not enough to convince your lordship, perhaps my machete will be more successful."

The disdainful look that Pablo threw down on him seemed to convey so forcibly the distance which existed between them that Benito leaped with rage.

"*Valga me Dios!*" he yelled, drawing out his machete.

"Benito!" cried Rosina, endeavoring to hold him back. He pushed her aside roughly.

Pablo's eyes glistened. He made a step toward him, but a beseeching look from Rosina kept him back.

"When asking you if you have seen the two American ruffians called Goliath," he said, "I merely use the right that any honest man has to question, under such circumstances, any person he may meet on his way. To-day, those murderers attack me, to-morrow they may come down upon you perhaps."

"I tell you again I never saw them!"

"Very well," said Pablo, taking compassion on Rosina's anguish. "I retire. May God protect the señora and grant her a safe journey!"

"Thank you, Señor *Caballero*!" answered the young woman with deep emotion, "thank you for your kind wish!"

She would have given anything to be able to whisper a word to Pablo; but at the first movement she made toward him, she was met by Benito's hard look of suspicion.

Bras d'Acier saluted the *capataz* with a haughty politeness which set his blood boiling in his veins, and the next moment he had disappeared in the depths of the wood.

"May all the fiends in hell wring your neck, you cursed Spaniard!" muttered Benito, shaking his fist in the direction he had taken. "Go on, go back to your camp—you'll hear something about me when you get there!"

"What do you mean, Benito?" asked Rosina.

"Nothing that you need know," he replied harshly. "This stranger has promised you something to tell him my secrets, did he?"

"Benito!"

"*Caramba*! you were talking with him in such an animated fashion! No doubt it is because his skin is a little whiter than mine that he has struck your eye already!"

And while the *capataz*, exasperated by the haughty disdain of the *gambusino*, vented his rage on his poor wife, Pablo was hurrying back to his companions.

His sudden and so unlooked-for meeting with Rosina had caused him the deepest impression. Rosina alive! He longed to be able to impart the glad tidings to Madame Vandeilles, who so often reproached herself with the part

that she, too, had unwittingly played in her little friend's supposed suicide.

"How delighted she will be!" thought Pablo, as he pressed onward and onward.

The two encampments were at a considerable distance from each other; the night was almost spent when he reached his friends.

To his astonishment, he found everybody afoot,—a remarkable fact, seeing that the sun had not risen yet. A vague feeling of anxiety took possession of him, which became more intense when, before reaching up to the fire, he noticed by the light of the blaze, the look of consternation depicted on the faces of two of the men who were moving to and fro. In two strides he had cleared the distance which still separated him from them. Patsy Green ran to meet him; the poor fellow's face was the picture of despair.

CHAPTER XI.

ON AND OFF THE SCENT.

"**M**ADAME VANDEILLES has been run away with," said the Irishman, choking with emotion.

Pablo said not a word, at first. The whole energy of his nature was needed to bury his grief deep, away from the eyes that were watching him.

Vandeilles stood there spying him. Pablo's effort was sublime. His death-like pallor alone could have betrayed him, but the fitful glimmer of the fire helped it to pass unnoticed.

"How did that happen?" he asked, almost calmly.

"This is how it was," commenced Ribonneau, always to the fore when talking was in question.

"Can't you let Patsy talk?" interrupted Craddle. "It was he that was with the little lady at the time. He knows about it better than anybody else. Let him tell it, himself!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked the Provençal, stung to the quick.

"I mean that you are forever spinning out a lot of rubbish that we don't believe a word of!"

"Might as well say I am a liar then!" cried Ribonneau.

And while he and the American set about arguing the point, Pablo moved a few paces away toward the forest, followed by the Irishman.

"Now tell me all," said he to him, sitting down and concealing his face with his two hands.

"It was no fault of mine, I'll take my dying oath," began Patsy, trembling like an aspen leaf; "sure wouldn't I have laid my life down twenty times over, rather than for the like to come to pass!"

"Do go on, tell me."

"Well, Don Pablo, we were going along through the wood, and we saw a herd of wild horses, *mustangs*, as poor Mundiaz used to call them (the Lord have mercy on his soul!) and among them, there was a magnificent bay mare that, seemingly, could not gallop very fast; she had part of a lasso dragging after her. Away everybody ran after her, barrin' Madame Vandeilles; and I stuck to my post near her as I had promised you. Well we were jogging along, side by side—all of a sudden I spy a deer nibbling the leaves of a tree, about two hundred paces away down in the forest. By the same token, it was not the deer I saw, but only his head bobbing up and down among the branches. Such lovely horns!—I creep along the ground toward him—the devil an inch he stirs. I go about taking aim—he moves away a little bit, and I after him, of course. Five or six times he dodges on like that, till at last I make a rush for him. This time I lose sight of him, and when I get to where I had seen him last, I find the marks of a man's foot on the clay, and no more sign of a deer than of a whale, only an old carcass of a head, horns and all, lying on the ground. 'The saints between us and all harm!' said I, as I bethought of Madame Vandeilles, and scampered back with all my might to where I had left her—she was gone!—I ran up and down—you'll believe me, won't you, Bras d'Acier? And I called as loud as I could bawl, I was like a raving maniac—no sign or token of the poor lady! Off I scuttled again, and it was not long before I found the foot-marks of two men."

"Did you recognize them?"

"No," said Patsy Green; "it was too dark; but one thing I'll go bail is that they were a sight too small for the Goliaths' feet. Then Vandeilles and the others came, and we made torches and began searching all over the place. Every man Jack of us was so fond of her, the poor creature—Sure, there's Craddle himself, that's as hard as flint-stone, and it's as much as he could do to gape, he was in such a flutter!—All we were able to make out was that the two men had got on horseback, about five hundred paces away from here. Most likely they had carried the poor thing as far as that. There's José and Craddle coming over! They'll tell you how we never lay down all night."

Pablo's heart was full to bursting.

"We must find her!" he said. "Patsy, I do not blame you, my poor fellow—" and as the miners were drawing near he added in a louder tone of voice: "in an hour's time, it will be daylight; have a little rest, all of you, until then. We probably have a hard day's work before us."

"What about yourself, Don Pablo?"

"Oh, you know I can do without sleep. Go and lie down. I will awake you at daybreak."

"Let me keep you company, Pablo," said Vandeilles. "In the state of anxiety I am in, I could not close my eyes.—Poor Berthe, where is she by this time? Who is it that stole her away? What for? It's enough to drive one mad!"

Pablo made no reply to the commonplace, feelingless remarks. He sat down at the foot of a tree, his rifle between his knees, supported his forehead with his two hands, and remained thus till sunrise.

As to Vandeilles, overcome by fatigue and stimulated by no genuine emotion, he soon gave way to sleep.

The tips of the forest trees scarce began to whiten beneath the first rays of dawn when Pablo aroused his companions; and a quarter of an hour later the whole party, in groups of two, had resumed the fruitless researches of the preceding night.

Their blind trust in Pablo filled them with hope and energy. Had a vein of the purest gold been in question, the brave fellows could not have shown more zeal or more carefulness in their exploration. Berthe's beauty, her courage, and her resignation throughout the hardships of the

life that her husband led her, had made on those rough hearts the deepest impression. Not finding her again would have been a real sorrow to them, in addition to their looking upon it as a disgrace.

Needless to recount here the various incidents of this search. How, short of wearying the reader, could we enter into the minute narrative of the sudden emotions, the shouts of joy, the cries of disappointment to which the most trifling details gave rise? Here it was a broken bough, there a blade of grass crushed to the ground, here again a stone with its damper side turned upward instead of lying buried in the soil, or a pool of water less clear than that of the neighboring one. Such were the thousand meager sources of information by which alone Madame Vandeilles's rescuers could guide themselves.

It was on Wednesday evening she had disappeared, the day after she had been saved from the grizzly by Pablo.

Thursday, the first day spent in her quest, passed off without any incidents. Though frequently losing the traces of the robbers, they succeeded in finding them again. During the night, from Thursday to Friday, the travelers were awakened by a dull but terrific rumbling sound, like the distant roar of a tempest through an immense forest, or even the softened voice of the ocean.

From this time forward, till daybreak, they could hear whole herds of animals running past them, and all in the same direction, from southwest to northeast. As this was opposite to the unaccountable noise they heard, it was to be supposed that these animals were all fleeing some common danger, the cause of which was still a mystery to the miners.

As soon as there was sufficient light to see the ground before them, they started on their painful errand once more.

About ten in the morning they reached the swampy district, by the borders of which they had journeyed two days before. Unfortunately, right here, there was a spot where the traces of the robbers' horses were inextricably mixed up with those of a herd of mustangs; presently their task became more difficult still, owing to the ground being covered with several inches of rain; and henceforth they were utterly deprived of any trustworthy indices.

For several hours they still pushed on, bent in two, their

heads close to the water, peering through it as best they could. They had eaten nothing yet. Their strength was fairly exhausted, and their stiffened limbs were kept up but by the energy of despair. At last, however, they needs should yield, and one by one they sat, or sank, on the nearest trunk of a tree.

Hitherto, Pablo had allowed them to do most of the work, merely helping them with an advice when he saw them unable to proceed. As for himself, he had prudently reserved his strength; and now that their powers were exhausted, he continued their labors alone. For almost three hours he searched, and searched to no purpose, all in the vicinity of the immense swamp, every clump of reeds, every little islet of verdure. Nothing could he discover, absolutely nothing.

And onward he still went, pale and haggard, his eyes riveted to the soil.

After taking some food, and resting somewhat their weary legs and backs, the miners joined him again. He had found no sign of the missing one.

The day wore sadly on; shortly before sunset they came to a flooded tract, which spread out before them as far as the eye could reach.

"The Birds' River has overflowed!" cried José, with a start. "What a fool I was not to have guessed it sooner! That's where the noise came from, that we heard last night."

After another half hour's march they were able to ascertain that José was right. The Birds' River covered an immense extent with its muddy waters. Were it not for the tops of a few trees, visible here and there above the surface, and for its violent eddies, this vast sheet of waters might have been mistaken for a huge lake, finally stopping the further progress of the rescuing party.

"Good God above!" exclaimed José, raising his eyes to heaven, "have pity on that poor little lady!"

Pablo would fain try if a rider could cross the swollen river. He mounted one of the horses and compelled him to enter the water. It was not long ere the poor animal stumbled against the roots of the trees and the trunks of shrubs, upturned and concealed by the flood. Presently he lost his footing altogether, and was well-nigh being carried

away, with his rider, by the force of the current. Bras d'Acier was forced to retrace his steps.

Twenty times, however, he renewed the attempt. Twenty times he was equally unsuccessful. His rashness, indeed, was all the more unreasonable as the mighty river whirled away whole trees and débris of every sort, which could not but upset the horseman and dash against him one after the other.

"Well, if I cannot ride, I shall swim across," he said, instantly beginning to strip off his garments.

"Don Pablo," cried Craddle, "allow me to say something to you."

"Well?"

"Well, you are running to death, as sure as you stand there now, and without any reasonable motive. Now, listen to me. Who told you that the darned ruffians have got to the other side of that river?"

"It is very probable, to say the least."

"Now, excuse me, sir. First and foremost, it is just as likely they were caught by the flood; for you know that a flood due to mountain torrents rises like lightning."

"It does."

"It might be they crossed over before the rise came on; if so, they are safe on the other side, and right away from us by this time."

"Still, we shall catch them up!" said Pablo.

"Or again,—which seems to me far more probable,—they were stopped by the water and had to go back. Now, if you'll let me tell you, sir, what I say is, that the further we waddle on through this swamp, the further we get away from the little lady."

Craddle had never been so eloquent since the last election meeting he had attended, years ago, in his little New England town. There was such a ring of practical sense in his words that Pablo immediately put on his dress again.

"You are right," he said. "I am going to walk along here outside the water's edge, on a line parallel with the river-bank. If the robbers have had to retrace their steps, I shall very soon make it out. Wait for me here, all of you, and rest yourselves in the mean time."

"What about resting your own self, Pablo?"

"I am not tired. Here, take back this horse, I don't want him."

One hour had not elapsed, when Bras d'Acier at last discovered the traces of two riders. He followed them for some time and ascertained that they took the direction opposite to the flood and seemed to verge back toward their starting point.

It was evident that the robbers were confident that they had thrown their pursuers off the scent; for they now seemed to have taken no precaution to conceal the marks of their passage.

The miners, to whom Pablo joyfully ran with the news, had no difficulty in following up the careless track; and, urged on by the hope of success, they pushed vigorously onward. As to Bras d'Acier, such was his feverish haste that his companions, riding though they were, could scarce keep pace with him.

CHAPTER XII.

NATURE ASSERTS HER CLAIMS.

FOR three days the miners journeyed thus at their utmost speed. On the third day the track of the two horsemen became mixed up with that of several other persons. Pablo examined both for a long time.

"These I know," he said to his friends. "They are the footprints I discovered close to our encampment last Tuesday, and that I told you about. Could it be that the men who stole Madame Vandeilles away belonged to that party?"

And the cruel thought threw him into a deep reverie. A suspicion flashed through his heart like cold steel. Rosina could never have been an agent in the kidnapping of Berthe? Oh, no! What fiend could nurture such a scheme?

"Come on!" he cried. "We are sure now that we are on the right scent. At any cost we must overtake the caravan before us!"

And though broken with fatigue the miners courageously followed him. Before the evening had come, they were able to notice that the people in front of them were also

traveling as quickly as they possibly could. It was easy to see it by the distance which separated the different spots where they had halted and lit their fires.

Human powers of endurance are limited ; and once again the rescuers felt compelled to take a little rest. As to their mounts, despite the incredible amount of fatigue that the Californian horse will bear, their poor mustangs were utterly disabled, *despeados* as they say in the West. Neither whip nor spur could now urge them on.

Bras d'Acier threw a look of discouragement on his men as they lay, thoroughly undone, round the fire. Impatient as he was for the issue of their race, he felt that the poor fellows could really proceed no further.

Ribonneau especially, and weakly José, were literally worn out.

As for himself, the fever that devoured him, that em-purpled his lips, usually so colorless, and convulsed the throbbing of his heart, kept up with its very fire the staying powers of his extraordinary constitution.

"I am going on," he said to them without the faintest tinge of reproach in his voice. "You come after me as soon as you are able. I shall leave the usual signs as I go along. Good-by, friends, for a while."

He shook hands with them and started off with that firm and elastic step which enables the red man to cover enormous distances with incredible rapidity.

For two days he followed the track of Benito's caravan, but was utterly unable to discover any token of Berthe's presence among them. Two or three times he fancied he recognized the footprints of the Goliaths, but these always seemed to have been made on the soil anterior to those of Benito's people.

Another fact which led one to suppose that the Americans did not travel in company with the latter was that their night encampments were always separate. In any case the matter weighed very little in Pablo's mind for the present ; all his thoughts were naturally concentrated on Madame Vandeilles.

Many a head of game crossed his path. Wild animals of all kinds passed him by. He could not help remarking that they all went in the opposite direction to his, and he took it for granted that they were returning to the valley of the

Bird's River whence they had been driven a few days before. Still there was, in the gait of these animals and the scared hurry of their race, a something that Pablo failed to fathom. This time, again, it was plain they were running away from some danger.

One evening, at last, he fell on a dying boar in whose body were still buried the broken shafts of several arrows.

"Could there be an Indian tribe hunting in these parts?" he asked himself, with anxiety.

And, weakened by his forced tramp as he was, he hurried on still quicker.

Toward the evening of the sixth day, he at length descried a fire blazing through the trees; his heart beat violently. Carefully keeping himself in the shadow of the trees he noiselessly crept toward the spot, and concealed himself in the underwood within fifty paces of it.

Around the fire, six persons were sitting or lying, among whom Rosina and Benito could be easily recognized. The others, who were unknown to Bras d'Acier, were Cypriana, Pepe Nieto and Domingo Salazar. On the side opposite to where he was, a kind of barricade, made with poles and branches wattled in hurdle fashion, protected the encampment, and at the same time prevented the projection of the light in that direction.

Outside this barricade stood Ramon Cazillas, who appeared to be on guard. Now and then he could be seen peeping over the hurdle and casting an eye of envy on the slices of *tasajo* which were roasting on the coals.

Bras d'Acier had previously observed that the distance between this and the last camping ground was much shorter than that which separated the preceding ones. The unusual precautions he now saw displayed on the present occasion showed him that Rosina's companions were apprehensive of some danger.

"No doubt they will have found traces of Indians," said Pablo to himself.

But what could have become of Berthe? Hitherto he had felt almost sure to find her with Benito's band; his fond hope was crushed at one blow, and he was now plunged back into the bitterness of fresh uncertainties.

For a whole week he had not closed his eyes. During all that time he had been almost constantly walking, and always

in a horribly fatiguing position, his body bent in two, his head bowed to the ground. His fever had taken away every semblance of appetite, and for four or five days he had eaten barely a few mouthfuls of biscuit.

Powerful as was his over-excitement, almost superhuman as was his endurance, his strength was now shattered. The perspective of recovering Berthe round this camp fire had supplied him with the necessary energy to reach it ; but this fictitious energy gave way in one moment under the blow of his disappointment.

A sort of torpor insensibly took possession of his every limb. His temples throbbed with violence. His brain hummed with the echoes of a thousand hammers ; his ideas grew confused. In vain he strove to arise and struggle against the prostration, of the approach of which he felt conscious. In vain, seeing himself unable to stand up, he made a last effort to crawl nearer to the bivouac in search of the faintest trace, the slightest hint on the fate of the young woman. His head grew dizzy.

"My God ! My God !" he murmured, as he clasped his burning forehead within his torn and bleeding fingers ; "My God, have pity on me ! Leave me my strength ! Leave me my reason, were it but for a few hours ! I will not give way—no, I will not—I want to live yet a while—I want to know what has become of her—I want to save her—"

It was in vain. His will was powerless against the evil.

One hour after reaching the encampment, Pablo lay at full length on the soil. As a result of the supreme struggle he still kept up to preserve his senses, the unfortunate man, a prey to cruel tortures, suddenly passed from a state of frantic delirium to one of prostration so complete that he looked a very corpse. The most terrible phasis in his position, perhaps, was that, during his lucid intervals, he felt the delirium gradually gaining on him.

Man was not born to live alone. In his hours of sickness, especially, he is instinctively inclined to ask for the help and the company of his fellow-creatures. Circumstances there are when he would rather fly into the arms of his bitterest foe than remain alone and unaided against the attacks of illness

As a consequence of the weakening of his faculties, Pablo experienced for one instant the wish to drag himself up to the bivouac and beg for assistance.

Yet, showing himself to Benito would have been equivalent to telling him that he was suspected of having kidnapped Madame Vandeilles, thereby putting him on his guard and suggesting to him the advisability of doing away with her, perhaps by means of one more crime.

In his exhaustion, Pablo was incapable of making this reasoning to himself, but he was impressed, so to say, with a vague perception of it. Its conclusion, especially, stood for ever present before his failing reason, like the one fixed idea that has taken possession of a drunken man's brain ; and he would cling in despair to the trunk of the tree, by which he had fallen, and would stiffen himself against nature's yearnings for another's aid.

After a few hours of this frightful struggle, Pablo completely lost consciousness.

When he came back to himself, when his eyes could discern something, and his reason could account for it, he saw his traveling companions by his side. His first thought was for Berthe. In the midst of the semi-conscious slumber in which his brain still lay wrapped, he opened his lips to inquire after her, but a vague sense of some obligatory restriction kept him silent.

Presently he saw Patsy Green coming to relieve Ribonneau, who had been holding up his head on his knees.

Meanwhile Vandeilles was rubbing his legs with pieces of cloth which Craddle heated one after the other before a huge fire.

"Patsy !" whispered he.

"The Lord be praised, he knows me again !" shouted the Irishman, almost dropping the poor patient's head to the ground with excitement. "Ah, didn't I tell you nothing beats whisky—barrin' potheen ! Sure, whisky, honey, you're a darlint, anyhow ! I'll give him another drop !"

"Surely, you won't do such a thing ?" exclaimed Ribonneau.

"Arrah, whist ! Let us alone !" said Pat.

And he prepared to pour another dose of his wonderful panacea down Bras d'Acier's throat.

"Patsy," murmured the latter, as his lips were close to the flask, "has she been found?"

The Irishman at once launched forth his rich vocabulary against an imaginary "varmint of a mosquito" that wouldn't leave a Christian's ear alone, and shook his head violently from side to side.

"Oh God, oh God!" sighed Pablo, his eyes closing helplessly once more.

This time, however, he recovered shortly; and he scarce had felt conscious of his movements again when he grasped the flask that O'Loughlin had kept under his nose for the last five minutes, like a smelling bottle, and swallowed a large mouthful.

"Be careful, Green," cried Vandeilles. "That's enough to kill a man straight off, in his weak condition."

A very expressive gesture was the only reply Patsy vouched to give. It might have been translated, "God help them furreners! Sure they don't know better!"

Meanwhile his "darlint," as he had called it, burned the creole's chest in a horrible manner. Large drops of perspiration rolled down his contracted cheeks. Still the liquor was restoring some stimulus to his shattered frame.

"Help me to stand up," he said to his Irish attendant.

He was raised on his feet, but he staggered like a drunken man.

"Stand me up against a tree," he added.

"But, Don Pablo—" ventured José.

"Stand me up against a tree," repeated Pablo, with gnashing teeth.

He was obeyed.

"The whisky?" he now asked.

Vandeilles and Ribonneau intervened once more. He made no answer to their remarks, he was too weak to do so, but he repeated in his hollow tone of voice:

"The whisky?"

Patsy Green handed him his flask, though reluctantly this time.

Pablo drank, without saying a word. His whole body trembled; the perspiration now streamed from his temples.

"There were men, right there," he said presently; "where are they?"

"They are gone," replied Vandeilles.

"When did they go?"

"Yesterday morning, I guess," said José; "for the ashes of their fire were not cold yet when we arrived last evening."

"Last evening?"

"Yes, Don Pablo. We have been at least fifteen hours here with you."

"Ah! And Madame Vandeilles?"

"No sign of her, yet."

"You are rested now?"

"We are, a little."

"Well, off we go."

"Off we go? What about you?"

"Put me on horseback."

"You will not be able to keep in your saddle."

"Fasten me to it, then."

All the objections put forth by his friends proved of no avail against the iron will of the *gambusino*, and they had to help him up on Madame Vandeilles's horse.

It was painful to behold him. By degrees, however, his energy recovered its wonted mastery. The power of human will overcame human nature; before the end of the third mile Bras d'Acier sat erect on his saddle, without any assistance, and was able to join in the general conversation.

When, at the fall of day, they made their usual halt, he was warmly wrapped up with cloaks and rugs, and had some little sleep. Next morning he was much better, and the caravan was away by daybreak.

About two o'clock in the afternoon Craddle and José, who were riding in front, stopped suddenly.

A troop of men had just appeared before them at a turning of the road.

CHAPTER XIII.

MANEUVERING.

"WHO goes there?" cried José.
"Gente de paz!" answered a voice.

Bras d'Acier heard it and recognized it at once as Benito's. He braced himself up on his saddle and spurred ahead,

"Let me speak to them," said he to his companions.

At that moment the whole of Benito's band came out of the wood, and Pablo saw the two Goliaths among them.

At the sight of the *gambusino* the two murderers seized their rifles.

"Order those two men to keep still," said Bras d'Acier to Benito. "I have a word to say to you."

"What do you want?" asked the *capataz*, after nodding to the Smithsons.

The two bands were equal in number; each contained six men; but Pablo's companions were better armed, and the fact had struck Benito forcibly.

"Two of your people have kidnapped a lady who traveled with us—the wife of this gentleman—"

"I don't know what you are talking about," answered Benito, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I am positively certain of what I say."

"What proof have you, then?"

Still calm and cool, in outward appearance, but the fire of his eyes throwing his marble features into stronger relief, Pablo explained the various motives on which his conviction rested.

Again the *capataz* sneered at the charge.

"What should I have taken her away for?" he asked. "What should I have done with her? You see very well she is not with us; and still you have come down on us unawares."

"The horse track of the robbers led us right up to your last camping place."

"What of that? The men you speak of follow the same road as we do, that's all! Besides, as you have followed their traces so long, you must be able to recognize them. Here are all our horses' hoofs plainly marked along this path. See for yourself if they are among them."

Pablo made a movement to go and examine the footprints; José stopped him:

"Don't take the trouble, Don Pablo," said he, "I have just looked at them myself; those we tracked up are not there."

"No matter," said Pablo, "I want to see for myself."

He had no sooner gone a few steps than a violent discussion arose between Vandeilles and Benito. In an instant

the latter's companions had their lassos ready, seeing the Frenchman yield as usual to his hasty temper and cock his revolver.

At a call from Craddle, Bras d'Acier hastened to return and stood between them.

"Well, señor?" inquired Benito.

"I do not find the old traces."

"Now you see—"

"Just one word more," added Bras d'Acier, his eyes turning toward the Goliaths. "How comes it that those two men are in your company? You had told me on your oath that you had not seen them."

"That is quite true," was the brazen answer. "They only joined us afterward."

"And you took them, knowing they were murderers?"

"*Caramba*, señor, don't you know the position we are in? We have a troop of over two hundred Indians before us."

"You have seen them?"

"No, thank God. If I had, I might not be telling my tale to your Lordship this moment; but we saw their track, and that's what made us turn back. From one moment to another, they may drop on us; and two rifles like those of the two Goliaths are not to be despised in a case of that kind."

Seeing the very exceptional code of morality in force at the placers, there was nothing to answer to such an argument.

"Say, Bras d'Acier," continued the *capataz*, "listen to this. Here we are, twelve well-armed men, all told; if we keep together, we are a match for a whole band of Apaches. If we go, each one his own way, it is most likely we shall be hashed up one after the other. Why mightn't we combine our forces and keep together until this danger is over? When we get safely through, we can part again—and if you have any account to settle with the two Goliaths—why, you can settle it then?"

Pablo listened in silence.

After all, Benito's proposal was a sensible one. Numbers of little details, which it would have been irksome to relate, had already led him to the belief that the district was being used as an Indian hunting-ground.

"I must go and consult my companions," he said at last.

"That's quite right," answered Benito

And both walked slowly, carefully, away from each other.

"This man has some hidden thought behind all this plausible talk," said Bras d'Acier, concluding his narrative to his men. "Still I am of opinion that we should accept his proposal."

"What! Associate with such wretches!" cried Vandeilles, "with those assassins, the Goliaths!"

"It is the only means I can see by which we may get at some information concerning Madame Vandeilles," answered Pablo. "And moreover, if, as is very probable, we are attacked by the Indians, twelve of us will not be too many to repulse them."

"Bras d'Acier is right," Craddle chimed in. "For the time being, we have no other course open to us but to join Benito's men. The only thing is, we shall have to keep one eye on them, even when we have the other on the redskins."

"What information can you expect to get?" persisted Vandeilles. "Everything seems to show that these brutes have had nothing to do with my wife's disappearance."

"I am not quite so sure of that, yet," said Pablo; "indeed, I firmly believe the very reverse. And as to that, I trust I shall know the whole truth ere long."

"How will you?"

"Well, trust me till then."

While this friendly debate went on, Benito was chatting with his men and relating to them his conversation with Bras d'Acier.

"Well, if ever I gulled a man in my life!" he chuckled, while rolling a cigarette between his fingers. "Of course, I tried to get him to make one party with us—you understand why?"

"Not exactly," interrupted Tom, with a frown.

"Well, this is why. First of all, from what I heard everybody say,—and your own selves, quite recently,—no man is better acquainted with the country we are in, than this Bras d'Acier."

"That's so," remarked Philip.

"So, if any one can get us out of these Indians' way, and pull us safe through these cursed Calleja plains, he is the man for it. When we have no further need of him and

his men, well—we'll try and find some good, honest plan to get rid of them."

"That may be all right, Benito ; but you'll find this devil of Bras d'Acier a hard customer to catch asleep."

"We can't but try !"

And thereupon another quarter of an hour was spent in further parleying, after which the two bands drew near each other.

It was agreed that they would march on, in concert, until such time as all apprehensions with regard to the Indians would have disappeared.

Bras d'Acier and Benito planned together various precautionary measures to be taken against the Apaches as well as for their mutual protection against each other.

So that numerical equality should at all times be maintained, it was agreed that the duties of guards, scouts, etc., should always be fulfilled by two men, one from each band.

José was coupled with Philip, whose wound was healing up, Craddle with Domingo, Ribonneau with Ramon, and Patsy Green with Pepe Nieto.

Bras d'Acier and Benito were naturally placed on the same footing and should therefore have associated together; but Pablo observed very justly that it would be advisable for either of the two leaders to be constantly with the main body of the caravan ; and, accordingly, Vandeilles was appointed the road companion of Benito, while Bras d'Acier enjoyed the amiable companionship of Tom Smithson.

Pablo had had one other motive for bringing about this combination : he wished, if possible, to have an opportunity of finding himself alone with Rosina, from whom he expected to obtain some information concerning the fate of Berthe. He was afraid, besides, that Goliath and Vandeilles might fall to quarreling. As to Benito, it so happened that the demon of jealousy had urged him to welcome the Frenchman as his side-man ; for, in truth, he had remarked that Rosina had more than once already drawn near him as though she wished to speak to him ; and Vandeilles, on his part, haunted by a confused recollection of the young Spaniard's handsome features, frequently cast a searching glance toward her.

In the course of the evening, availing herself of the few

minutes during which Benito was looking to his horse, Rosina stole to Vandeilles's side.

"Monsieur de Mareuil!" she whispered.

At the mention of this name, which he had ceased to bear since he had left San Fernando, the Frenchman at once remembered her.

"Can it be? Is it you, Doña Rosina?" he said.

"Hush! For God's sake!" she prayed. "Do not look as if you knew me—"

"Why so?"

"No time to tell you now, but for the sake of all you hold dearest on this earth, tell Benito not a syllable of what took place at San Fernando. You would be the cause of my death."

"He would have to kill me first, I swear it to you!" answered Vandeilles, "and—"

Rosina waited for no more. She had just caught her husband's glance fixed upon her and had instantly moved toward him. He threw his saddle on the ground, and, without putting the fetters on his horse as usual, came and met her half way.

"*Caramba!* What were you saying to that Frenchman?" he asked, angrily.

"He was asking me—"

"Very well, very well; if he has any questions to ask in future, tell him in one word to come and ask me, do you hear?"

"Why, your jealousy is really absurd, Benito; you are well aware Mr. Vandeilles is a married man, since it is his wife that these travelers were looking for when they joined us."

"That has nothing to do with it. I forbid you to talk with those men. And, by the way, if any of them ever happened to question you, bear in mind that the Goliaths are with us only since yesterday—"

"How? Since yesterday?"

"I said so; did I not? Since yesterday—and that we have always kept together, all of us, day and night, since—"

"But, Ramon and Domingo have—"

"Hold your tongue! that must not be known! If it were, the two bands would be down, one on the other, at once."

Rosina bowed her head and said nothing.

While keeping within bounds the feelings of impatience which devoured him, and feigning to think of nothing but the most suitable path to indicate to the travelers, Bras d'Acier scanned everything about him. The most trifling circumstance was noted in his memory. Thus, the newly formed caravan had not proceeded more than a couple of miles when he had remarked that the horses ridden by Ramon and Domingo were hardly broken. To rebel, as they did, against their evidently skillful riders, the horses could have been but very recently deprived of their liberty.

Under secret instructions from Pablo, Craddle began to indulge in coarse jokes about Domingo, whose horse, a beautiful dark bay stallion with a wild and wicked eye, stopped short now and then, and answered the spurring of the former vacquero with frantic kicks and plunges.

"I guess we'd better light the fire and put down a few pieces of *tasajo*," sneered Craddle; "by the time they'll be nice and brown, maybe you'll have moved a whole inch, fair measure!"

"*Caramba*, I should like to see you in my place," retorted Domingo. "This horse has the devil in him!"

"Tut, tut, I guess we know those devils, we Americans, we do! *We'd* soon tickle them out of any stallion in creation!"

"*Capa de Dios!* I'd give something to come across a Yankee that would break a wild horse quicker than I would!"

"Quicker, you said, stranger?—Hallo!—Clear the track! Another shy! What an escape that poor pine tree had, that time! I guess—"

"You guess to the devil and stop there!" cried Domingo, beside himself. "The first mustang we catch, I'll give it to you and we'll see you breaking it in forty-eight hours!"

"Forty-eight hours! Why, you have had that thing under you for a fortnight, anyway!"

This time Domingo burst out with derisive laughter.

"I knew they were good judges of horse flesh in Yankee-land!" he exclaimed. "Well, there is not a fool in my country but would see I only caught this devil the day before yesterday, at the same time as Ramon's!"

This was all Craddle wanted to ascertain; however, he none the less kept up his banter for some time, the more so

as Domingo seemed to regret the admission he had just made unwittingly, and was apparently anxious to see if the American had paid any particular attention to it. The latter soon changed the topic of conversation, and the dull, phlegmatic look he had assumed reassured the imprudent vacquero.

A few minutes after, passing, as if by chance, close to Bras d'Acier, he whispered to him rapidly :

"You were right—the horses were caught the day before yesterday."

At the end of half an hour's further progress, Pablo, who led the combined bands, suddenly altered his direction.

"Say, we are making for the road that I had taken at first and that brought us to the neighborhood of the Indians," said Benito, coming to him at full speed.

"For the present it cannot be helped. By and by we shall see. As to that, let me go on ahead by myself."

"Goliath will go with you."

"He need not. His brother being wounded, my men are a match for yours, even without me. I am the only one here who can go near the Indians without arousing their attention. Halt in this spot and wait till I return."

This plan was evidently not to Benito's taste, but evidently, likewise, telling Pablo his real motive was out of the question. So he let him follow up his new idea.

Bras d'Acier was back in three hours' time.

"Well?" inquired the *capataz*, running to him.

"I saw the footprints of the Indians. They are Apaches. You see that cerro rising up yonder, three miles to our left? Well, we must make our way to it as fast as we can. At the foot of the peñon is a long cañada surrounded with wood. We shall go down this ravine; by the day after to-morrow we shall have put the precipices that border the peñon between us and the Indians, and we shall be safe for some time."

"You are right," said Benito, from whose breast Pablo's words seemed to have removed a great weight. "That's the best thing we can do."

"Let us set off at once!" suggested fussy Ribonneau.

"No!" sharply replied Pablo. "It is too late this evening. To-morrow we shall start at daybreak."

And he walked toward the encampment,

"Well, Don Pablo," inquired Vandeilles, advancing to meet him, "any news of my poor wife?"

"None," answered Bras d'Acier, as he gave an unusual pressure to the hand of the Frenchman.

At the same time, the latter, to his great surprise, felt a piece of paper slipped between his fingers. A few minutes after, he stopped behind the rest under pretext of settling his bridle, hurriedly opened the mysterious slip, and read the following words traced with the juice of wild berries :

It is two of these men that have kidnapped Madame Vandeilles. I am sure of it now. I have found the corpses of their two former horses ; they were stabbed to death with machetes and buried in the forest. Let us first get away from the Indians at such a distance as they cannot hear our shots. The cañada of the Rosario is very narrow and steep ; we shall all have to dismount. Our enemies will thus lose any possible advantage over us. Be ready. When I call out "God help the right !" fall on the man next to you. Spare the lives of Benito, Ramon, and Domingo. We need their revelations to be able to find Madame Vandeilles. Pass this round, but be cautious. Do not trouble about Patsy and José, who cannot read. I shall tell them myself.

While supper was being prepared, Vandeilles obeyed Bras d'Acier's instructions.

In the singular position in which these two hostile bands were placed toward one another, by their enforced co-operation, the men spied each other's movements with an amount of care easy to be understood. And Pablo had preferred writing this secret message to being seen speaking to each of his companions in turn, or holding any sort of a council with them. This would have been more than sufficient to put the others on their guard.

Everything passed off successfully ; but next morning, at starting time, Ribonneau well-nigh spoiled the whole scheme. The late Marseilles soap dealer had an insurmountable mania for "posing." At the thought of the approaching struggle he began assuming the airs of a stage Indian on the war-path. He wrinkled his brow and spoke in a mysterious style, or he would caress his mustache and stroke the butt-end of his revolver.

Bras d'Acier soon perceived that Benito, a close observer like all those of his race, was watching the Provençal. He took an early opportunity of making the latter understand how ill-timed his theatrical attitudes were, but there was

every reason to fear it was already too late. Benito could plainly be seen calling his men to attention, nor were they slow in taking up his hints.

This, notwithstanding, the caravan soon entered the narrow ravine of which Pablo had spoken; and ten minutes later the men fell in Indian file, each one holding his horse by the bridle.

Bras d'Acier went first and somewhat ahead of the rest; Goliath followed him. Then came Ribonneau and Ramon, Vandeilles and Benito. The *capataz* kept an eye on Rosina and her child, after whom came Cypriana, Domingo, and Craddle, Philip Smithson and José. Pepe Nieto and Patsy Green closed up the rear.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THE reader now must make a short retrograde movement to ascertain the fate of poor Berthe de Mareuil, *alias* Madame Vandeilles.

It will be remembered that Tom Smithson had promised Benito to suggest a plan to him by which Pablo and his companions might be delayed on their journey. The plan was cunning enough. Either by listening to the conversation of the miners, within twenty paces of whom he had been more than once for the past fortnight, or indeed by the evidence of his own eyes, Tom had become aware of the sincere interest they showed toward Berthe, and the idea had struck him that kidnapping her would be an easy means of checking their march onward and giving Benito's band ample time to gain ground.

Ramon and Domingo had immediately been intrusted with the affair, with a strict recommendation that they should act only in Bras d'Acier's absence.

As was seen above, the two vacqueros had set out on Tuesday evening. During the whole of the Wednesday they kept within easy distance of the miners, who were under Vandeilles's guidance while Pablo was away; and we saw how, at a given moment, they had allured Patsy Green right away from his charge. The honest fellow had scarcely been got out of sight of the young woman when

the two wretches had crept through the underwood and fallen down on her. In an instant, a manga had been thrown over her head, and they were running away with her to the spot where they had left their horses.

There the poor woman, securely garroted, had been placed in front of Ramon's saddle, and the two ruffians had galloped off in a direction opposite to that of the two caravans. In accordance with Benito's instructions, they had traveled a good part of the night and had continued their race, always in the same line, immediately after sunrise.

Not before Thursday night, after crossing the swamp, had they taken advantage of a clump of trees, not far from the bank of the river, to halt for a few hours.

They had relieved the horses of their saddles, and at once set about preparing their *pinole* and roasting their slices of *cecina*. As to Berthe, there was no fear of her trying to escape in this immense desert, which was quite unknown to her; and so they had loosened her bonds, and the poor creature was able to walk about and stretch her weary limbs.

"Say, mate, what are we going to do with the little one, now?" asked Ramon.

"You know what Benito said," answered Domingo.

"I am not over-fond of killing women, I am not."

"Specially when they are pretty, eh?"

"Well, I don't mind saying this one has taken my fancy."

"Indeed? And she has taken mine, too!"

"You don't say so! And Cypriana?"

"What has Cypriana to do with you?"

"Ah, that's the way, is it? *Caramba!*"

"Come, leave your machete alone, *amigo*. What say you to a game of monte?"

No Mexican could resist the fascination of monte.

"Right you are!" replied Ramon, with a frown, "but that little matter must be settled afterward."

And two minutes later the cards were in full swing. At first the two scoundrels cast frequent glances on Madame Vandeilles; but soon their passion for their national game made them forget even their prisoner; and she, availing herself of such an unexpected opportunity, kept moving away by slow degrees, and at last disappeared in the depth of the woods.

"*Capa de Dios!*" suddenly exclaimed Ramon, who had just lost an *albur*, "where is my French girl gone?"

"She is not gone very far, you bet," laughed Domingo; "she would be too much afraid to lose us and be by herself in this place!"

"Still—"

"Hark, will you!"

They could hear a dull sound, increasing every moment and apparently drawing nearer to them with frightful rapidity.

"What is that rumbling noise?" asked Ramon, evidently ill at his ease. "How near it is getting!"

"*Voto al Demonio!*" exclaimed his companion, "I lay you that the torrents of the Sierra Mazitta have made the Birds' River overflow!"

They were on their horses in a bound and away to the river's edge.

"*Caramba!*" cried Ramon. "You are right; see how quick the river comes up. We have not a minute to lose if we want to get off in time."

"I believe you—but we must catch our prisoner first!"

And they called for Madame Vandeilles with all their might. No answer. They looked up and down for her. It was in vain.

And now their instinct of self-preservation proving stronger than their captain's injunctions, they were gradually increasing the distance between them and the river, and kept on shouting, "The river has overflowed! Come back; all this land will be under water in no time! If you care for your life, come back quick!"

"Let her go to the devil!" cried Domingo at last. "I am not going to get drowned for her sake! I am off, *amigo!*"

And so saying, he let the bridle loose on the neck of his steed, whose instinct proved more powerful even than the vacquero's spurs.

Ramon followed him, though not without one last look after the victim he left behind.

Concealed in the very center of a clump of young birch trees and tulas, within two or three hundred paces of her captors, Berthe had heard their cries and their terrible predictions. Though appalled at the announcement of the

approaching tide, the noise of which had not escaped her notice, she had kept crouched low in her hiding-place. Any fate she would rather face than being once more the helpless prey of the two ruffians.

As soon as she felt certain they had gone, she came out with all possible caution, and after casting a searching glance all around, to make assurance doubly sure, she began to run as fast as she could away from the river. Alas, it was too late already! The waters were spreading on every side of her with terrific speed. Within a very few minutes the flood had risen up to her waist. Soon she found herself in the middle of an immense lake, then she felt the relentless wave lifting her bodily off the ground and dragging her along. The poor woman closed her eyes and recommended her soul to her Creator.

Presently the current knocked her against the trunk of a tree. Berthe instinctively threw out her arms, her right hand hit on one of the branches and she grasped it with all the frenzy of despair.

Trained to dangers as she had been by the life she had led for the past three years, she lacked neither courage nor presence of mind. From this first plank of salvation, she lifted herself up to a higher one, and thence to a third, until she was quite two or three feet above the flood. It still kept on rising, however, and she soon had to climb yet higher. Fortunately the tree, placed by Providence in the way of the poor waif, was an ahuehuelt, and the regular arrangement of the branches, at this distance from the ground, made her ascent less difficult.

Animals of all sorts continually passed near her. Some swam and made vain endeavors to struggle against the current; others clung to trees that had been uprooted by the stream.

Among other animals, Madame Vandeilles saw two jaguars pass her by. One of them had squatted between the branches of a cypress, the roots of which touched the tree on which she was. The jaguar, displeased, and indeed frightened, at his compulsory nautical excursion, made a move to spring on the cedar. The cypress having veered round in consequence of this very movement, the jaguar missed his leap, fell into the water, and in a few minutes was lost to view.

And now night came and added its terrors to those that Berthe was already a prey to. For fear she should give way to sleep, she fastened herself to the tree with her belt. This indeed was a needless measure of precaution; not once did she close her eyelids.

At every moment, trunks of trees and débris of all kinds knocked against her cedar and shook it.

Then, with the low rumble of the flood, were mingled the mad roars of the wild beasts that were carried off by the current or roamed about the neighboring forest. Away through the thicket, or beneath her on the surface of the water, the flash from their fiery eyes would suddenly meet her gaze in the dark, and she would shrink back with horror.

The rising of dawn was a relief and a joy for the unfortunate one, though it revealed no improvement in her sad position; nor did the day that followed.

Toward evening Berthe began to feel the pangs of hunger. She had taken nothing for thirty-six hours. She was dying of thirst, too; yet she was afraid to go down for a little water; she might have been dragged away by the current, or, more probably, she might have been unable to climb up again to her place of safety; for her strength was gradually giving way.

The night from Friday to Saturday was a less anxious one than the preceding, for exhaustion overcame the poor woman and she slept for several hours. When she awoke, however, she was broken with fatigue, benumbed with cold, and famishing. Her thirst was now such that she needs should yield to its cravings; down she stepped from one bough to another; then, clasping her left arm around the tree, she brought up a little water to her parched lips in the hollow of her right hand. And now she would fain regain the top of the tree once more, but her strength failed her; two or three times she well-nigh dropped into the huge lake below.

Suddenly, just as a prayer ascended heavenward from her painfully heaving breast, she fancied she heard in the distance the sound of a human voice.

She trembled from head to foot, and by a desperate effort she climbed up a few branches without stopping. She looked all around, but saw nothing; her weary eyes were

dimmed with tears. Had her poor, reeling brain deceived her? No; away in the watery mist she could now perceive a canoe, or perhaps the trunk of a tree, on which a man was seated. It seemed as though he was endeavoring to cross the river, higher up the stream than where she was. She cried with all the strength that was left her; she waved her handkerchief, and did all in her power to attract the attention of the bold traveler. The latter went on his way without turning his head. It was evident he heard and saw nothing.

Presently his voice was heard again. To Berthe's utter astonishment she recognized he was singing. The wind, which prevented her voice reaching him brought the very words of his song to her ear. The words were French, but pronounced with an accent quite unknown to the bewildered creature who heard them. Soon they became more distinct, and she felt sure he was nearer to her than before. Her first impulse was to cry out again, but her voice almost died on her lips from faintness, and she resolved to spare her strength until the canoe should be quite close to her *ahuehuilt*.

The traveler continued singing; his voice was rough and uncultivated, yet not devoid of a certain charm. When he had finished his first verse, he stood up to look all around him. Madame Vandeilles then perceived that his boat was simply the trunk of a tree, sharpened to a point at each end and hollowed out in the center. He might yet be three or four hundred paces away from her.

Again she waved her white handkerchief, which she had fastened on the top of a long stick, and gathered up all her strength into one shrill cry. This time he heard her voice, made a movement of surprise, and looked about him; unfortunately he only searched the surface of the water, and never dreamed of raising his eyes upward.

At one moment Berthe really believed he would pass by without seeing her. Once again she inwardly called on her God for help and made one last attempt. This time, however, she was so utterly exhausted that her cry barely lasted a few seconds.

At last the man in the canoe, puzzled to see no living creature around him, looked up and noticed the white signal of distress; then he perceived Madame Vandeilles, who, in

her desperation, hung out of the foliage to the great risk of falling down.

For an instant the unknown man stood still, as if wondering what he should do. Then he sat down again and took his oars, which he had dropped when he stood up to look about himself.

"What is he going to do?" Berthe asked herself, when she saw him rowing as though he meant to continue his previous journey right across the river.

But she soon was reassured.

Swiftly, too swiftly, perhaps, the canoe was drifting toward the ahuehuelte; it was plain the rower was merely using his oars to guide his craft and avoid the manifold débris floating pell-mell on the surface of the water.

Just as the canoe came to five or six feet of the cedar, it butted against the roots of another tree that was submerged beneath the surface, described half a circle upon itself, and shot past Berthe's tree, carried off by the flood. Berthe uttered a cry of despair. Immediately the man was on his feet, and out of his right hand whirled a stone fastened to a rope, of which he held the other extremity tight in his left hand. A missile from a catapult would not have whizzed past Berthe with greater force, and the next instant the rope had coiled itself several times around the cedar.

Then, hauling himself and his canoe with his improvised hawser, the stranger was by the side of Madame Vandeilles in a moment.

He might have been twenty years old at most; his height was below the average. His long, flowing brown hair, parted in the middle, came down on each side of his head to his sailor's oilskin sou'wester. He wore a round, black felt hat, with very narrow brim. On the crown of it were displayed those variegated chenille ribbons, with which the French peasants of the Finistère and the Morbihan districts adorn their headgears on Sundays and holidays, and on this ornament were firmly stitched various lead medals and a small silver cross.

Under this hat, the sad condition of which revealed many months of service, was a soft, peaceful face, blue eyes of remarkable clearness, pretty regular features, and two lips as fresh and as pink as those of a child.

There was visible, in that country-cherub's head, a singular mixture of gentleness and firmness, of credulous *naïveté* and enthusiasm, of courage and timidity.

On reaching up to Berthe, he took off his little hat.

"Good-day, madame," he said, with a kindliness and reserve which excluded all possible suspicion of a jest.

Surprised at such a greeting, and, moreover, benumbed with cold and terror, Madame Vandeilles could barely stammer a few words which he could not understand.

"You are hungry, poor woman!" he said, suggestively. "Here, take this bit of biscuit. That is all I have to give you, unfortunately."

And he offered her a piece of sea-biscuit which he had taken out of a game-bag hanging from his shoulder.

"I am thirsty," murmured Berthe.

"I'll go and fetch you some water."

"No," she said, "let us try and reach the bank at once."

"I rather think it would be better to wait a little longer. I found it very hard to manage the boat by myself. With two of us in it, I am sure I could not."

"For the love of your mother, don't abandon me here!"

"Of course not! Loïc Kermainguy never left a Christian without help in danger. We shall get to land together, or perish together, if such be the holy will of God."

"And what if the boat broke loose while we are here?"

"I hope it won't. The fact is, you see, madame," Loïc added, like a boy making a painful confession, "I have never been one of the strong lads at home; my arms are tired, just this minute, and I know I could not row very far unless I take a little rest."

"Let us wait then," sighed Madame Vandeilles.

"I'll go down and fasten the boat safe, and at the same time will fetch you up some water."

All this was said with incredible matter-of-fact calmness and composure, especially considering the dangerous situation both he and his companion were placed in.

It was fully five minutes before he returned. He had in one hand a primitive-looking wooden bowl containing some water, and on one of his arms an old ragged cloak, which he threw on the young woman's shoulders.

Then he took a brandy flask out of his game-bag and poured a few drops into the bowl.

"Drink this, madame," said he. "It's brandy. The woman that I lodged with at San Francisco gave it to me as I came away—and this cloak, too. I brought it along with me in case I should ever come across any poor traveler that might be sick."

Somewhat revived by the meager repast she had made, Madame Vandeilles inquired what he proposed doing.

"In an hour's time, I shall be rested," replied Kermainguy. "Then we shall get down to the boat and try to reach the dry land."

"Do you think we shall succeed?"

"God alone knows that. His will be done!"

"Are you not afraid of death?"

"I must say I care for life; just now especially I should not like to die, madame, because I have a task to accomplish first; but if such were the will of Providence, why should I rebel against it?"

And so saying he looked up to heaven, and the blue of his eyes was so clear, so limpid, they almost seemed transparent.

Besides that feeling of curiosity which is natural to all mankind, Berthe felt urged to question Loïc by a very legitimate desire to know the rescuer in whose hands she was about placing her life. She therefore began by explaining to him how she found herself in the middle of this flooded valley and told him a portion of her adventures. Then in answer to her inquiry, he at once and without reserve related how his name was Kermainguy, how he came from Douarnenez in Finistère, and how he was making his way to the mines.

"What? By yourself?" asked Berthe.

"Yes, madame."

"Without any tools, or baggage, or provisions?"

"I had not money enough to buy all that."

"And you had courage enough to undertake such a journey under such conditions?"

"I had trust in God and in Our Lady of Auray."

"You must be very desirous to make a fortune!"

"Indeed I am! But for that, I never would have come away from our village and the good old folks at home."

"Then it is for them you are coming here to look for gold?"

"For them, too ; but more still for somebody else."

"Some young girl, perhaps?"

"Oh, no, madame!" quickly replied the Breton, a blush and a look of displeasure spreading over his face.

Berthe felt he did not care to say more on this subject, and asked him what his father did.

"Father and mother are both dead."

"I thought you had spoken of the good old folks at home."

"I meant my grandfather and grandmother. They are alive. He is the gardener at the Marquis of Tregastel's, whom may God bless, himself and all that are his!"

One thing had struck Madame Vandeilles: it was the manner in which the young man expressed himself. She was puzzled to reconcile the popular errors of grammar he committed with the elegant, well-nigh poetical, turns of speech he frequently used, and likewise to couple this language with his rustic appearance.

Her last queries had probably summoned before his mind quite a long train of home memories, for there he was, astride on a big bough, gazing, without a word, at his boat as it tossed to and fro beneath him.

"Now it's time to go," he said suddenly, but without the least flurry.

And he helped Berthe down from her perilous position. Then, having seated her with the utmost precaution at the back part of the little boat, he took up his rough-hewn oars of pinewood and pushed off without any more ado than if he were going through an every-day task.

As he began to row, Berthe noticed his hands were torn and bleeding.

"Poor fellow, how sore that must be!" she said.

"The Redeemer suffered much worse than that for us," answered the little Breton.

And so saying, with that peculiar mystic beam on his countenance which gave his companion a slight feeling of uneasiness concerning the state of his brain, he murmured a few words of prayer, and plied his oars with such energy as would not have been expected from so weak-looking an individual.

The coolness he preserved in the midst of the dangers that beset them at every instant was truly astonishing. Should all his efforts fail—as they did at several of the

turnings in the river—to keep the boat from being carried away with the stream, he would quietly stand up, after taking in his oars, and, lassoing the first tree that would come within his reach, he would haul himself in the direction he wished to maintain.

After one hour's struggle and narrow escapes, both the river and the flooded valley had been rowed across, and with a heart full of gratitude to Heaven, Berthe stepped on dry land once more.

The young Breton almost took, in the light of a painful jest, the expressions of her thankfulness toward him for saving her from the jaws of death; and it was with the greatest difficulty she prevailed upon him to let her put a water dressing on his bleeding hands. They should lose no time—his hands would be all right—they should make headway.

Whither? Berthe very soon found out what a poor guide he would be, if she had to depend on him. It seemed, indeed, a very miracle that he should have come so far through these immense solitudes without losing his way or falling a victim to some accident.

“Which way did you mean to go when you passed by me?” she asked.

“I hardly know, madame. When I left San Francisco, I was told that the mines lay north-northeast; so I kept on walking in that direction. During the first few days, I met people from time to time who showed me the road, and afterward I hit upon the tracks of other travelers and followed them; but for the last four days I had lost every possible means of guiding myself. I was beginning to be sorely puzzled when the good God put you on my way.”

“Then it little matters to you where you go, so long as you get to the mines.”

“It does not matter at all; but, first of all, we must try and find your friends.”

“They, too, are going to the mines; so, in any case, we cannot do better than try to join them.”

“As you like, madame.”

Fortunately for the two castaways they had landed near the spot where Bras d'Acier had discovered the footprints of the two riders, Ramon and Domingo. After her two

years' roughing through the wilderness of California with her husband, Madame Vandeilles was beginning to know how to guide herself in the forests ; and, on the other hand, having no further cause to conceal their movements, Pablo's and Benito's bands had left behind them traces which it was easy to follow.

And with what trembling haste poor Berthe pushed onward along those tracks ! Her only sustenance was, of course, the hard sea biscuit that Loïc shared with her ; and even that should be sparingly used, she thought, for the little stock was drawing to an end.

This woeful perspective seemed to cause very little trouble to Kermainguy, who, for that as for everything else, trusted implicitly to Providence ; and his wonderful faith kept the poor woman from actual despair ; yet the thought of the morrow was forever before her troubled mind, and the distance seemed endless which separated her from her friends.

CHAPTER XV.

BLOOD WILL HAVE BLOOD.

ALTHOUGH inured to the ways and habits of placer life, where one must needs vie in cunning with foes whom no scruple restrains, Pablo, on his way down the ravine, felt himself held back by a kind of chivalrous loyalty which forbade him striking an enemy before putting him on his guard. Though he was convinced of Benito's bad faith, and suspected him, moreover, of some treacherous intention, he found it hard to bring himself to give the signal for the attack.

Two or three times he had turned round to utter the word of command, and every time his lips had remained closed.

The time was near, however, when he should make up his mind ; they were coming near the end of the cañada ; a few minutes later they would emerge to a pretty wide plateau. Once there, Benito's companions being at liberty to mount their steeds again, Pablo's troop would lose all its advantage. The thought of Berthe and of the sufferings, if nothing worse, inflicted upon her by those fiends, once

more passed before his mind with all the force of reality, and he turned round fully determined this time to avenge her on the instant.

In one glance he examined the position of each individual, and at the same time made a swift survey all around to ascertain that no other danger was imminent.

As he did so he made so sudden a gesture that Goliath, startled by it, laid his hand on his rifle.

Pablo had just perceived, far away behind the men, two persons coming in the same direction as they did. Presently the sounds of a strange melody reached their astonished ears. They stood still and turned to seek the origin of this singular music, and then discerned the two travelers that their guide had been examining.

They were still so far that they appeared merely as two black spots at the far end of the dark cañada.

"They are not Indians, I swear," said Benito, whose sight was keener than that of his companions.

The ravine was so very narrow, right here, that two persons could not walk abreast. Still Bras d'Acier could not contain his impatience. He ordered a halt. Then clinging, now to the sharp edges of the rocks, now to the branches or the trunks of trees, he made his way along the side of the caravan and reached the rear.

"Where are you going?" asked Vandeilles.

"To see what's coming there."

"I'll go with you! I have a presentiment I am going to hear something of Berthe."

Pablo thought to himself how imprudent it was for two of them to leave their friends at the same time, and expose them to a sudden attack on the part of their more numerous enemies. Had he drawn the Frenchman's attention to it, thoughts of another nature might have been suggested thereby to his diseased mind; so the creole said nothing and allowed him to pass on before.

"God!" exclaimed Vandeilles. "It is Berthe herself!"

Bras d'Acier had long since recognized her; yet he had sufficient self-control to keep back within a short distance of the caravan, while Vandeilles lavished upon his wife all the outward protestations of joy of which he was capable.

The miners had watched her approach with heartfelt emotion and they soon crowded toward her after Pablo,

She pressed his hand with unrestrained delight.

"How altered you look, Monsieur de Verrières!" were the first words that burst from her lips.

"I have had a little fit of illness; but I am quite well *now!*" he replied.

She, too, was greatly altered. Fatigue, anguish, and want of sleep had furrowed her features and reddened her eyelids.

Pressing forward next to Bras d'Acier was Patsy Green, who threw himself at the young woman's knees, crying like a very child.

"Get up, my brave Patsy," she said to him, holding out her tiny hand to raise him up. "You were in no way blamable for what happened. No queen could have been attended with more care than I have been by all of you, my good friends. Oh, I am so happy to be with you once more!"

And while she related to her sympathetic hearers the various details of her disappearance and presented her rescuer, Loïc, to them, Benito and Goliath were holding council with their men.

"The devil take all our plans now!" exclaimed Benito. "This cursed woman will tell her friends everything; and she'll recognize you two, Ramon and Domingo, at first sight—you stupid brutes. Why didn't you stop her squealing forever, as I had told you to?"

"We were full sure she was drowned," Domingo answered. "How she managed to escape, I'd like to know!"

"Come, Benito," said Philip Smithson, as the latter was venting his passion in useless reproaches and invectives against the two vacqueros, "what is done can't be undone. She is alive and she can't be dead. The thing is, what's the next move?"

"We'd better wait," said Tom.

"I don't think so," objected Domingo. "Bras d'Acier has more men than we. By and by they'll be down on us; and, with their rifles and pistols, we'll be no match for them."

"To-day they'll think twice before they use them," remarked Benito.

"Why?"

"On account of the Indians."

"The Indians are a long way off ; and the knife that's next to your skin is the one you look after first."

"Well then," said Benito, "our best chance is this very minute, while all the fools are about the young woman and not thinking of us. We'll surely put one or two out of the way before they know what we are about. After that, we can manage the others."

"All right," answered the giant. "I'll look after Bras d'Acier. When that fellow is gone, the lot won't be worth much !"

"Send the women on ahead," said Philip. "That will look less suspicious ; and we can fall down on them quite unexpectedly."

"No such thing," replied Benito ; "the women might be in the way of stray bullets. I want them to keep behind us."

"Send them to Halifax, if you like !" growled Tom. "Here, get out, and let me pass first !"

For an instant, absorbed in the enjoyment of his happiness at seeing Madame Vandeilles once again, Pablo had forgotten his hostile fellow-travelers.

Craddle, always matter-of-fact and practical, was fortunately on the alert. He crept between the legs of two miners who stood before him and made his way to his chief :

"Look out," he whispered, "Benito and the Goliaths are coming this way."

At the sight of danger, Pablo reassumed his habitual coolness.

"Keep exactly as you are," said he to those next to him, "and pass my words down without turning your heads. We are going to be attacked. Let each one look after the man he had for companion up to this. As for you, madame," he added, addressing Berthe, "keep a short distance behind, and, I beseech you, do not stir from behind the horses; they will shelter you; there you will be safe."

"What is coming on again ?"

"A fight that your return has only delayed a few moments."

"Oh God ! Oh God !" she cried, raising her eyes to heaven.

"Can you recognize, from here, the two men who took you away?"

"Yes; there they are, near Philip Smithson. The first of the two is the wretch who had me in his arms on his saddle, and—"

Pablo was off; he had grasped the branch of a tree that overhung the ravine and had swung himself forward to a spot between Benito's band and Cradde.

As he dropped on his feet, Goliath knocked Craddle to the ground with a blow of the butt-end of his gun in the chest, so as to fire on the creole almost at arm's length. The latter had already disappeared, like a snake, between the legs of a horse, had sprung on Ramon and instantaneously his machete had come down with such force, or, better, with such rage, that the blade penetrated several inches into the skull of the *vacquero*. He stretched out his arms and fell like a mass of lead.

So deep was the machete embedded in the bone that Bras d'Acier had to put his foot against the head of the wretch in his efforts to get it out again. While doing so, however, he felt his two arms suddenly clasped in the noose of Pepe Nieto's lasso. He threw himself on his aggressor, and with the violence of the shock both rolled to the ground. Nieto was under, but he kept a firm hold of the lasso and thus paralyzed his prisoner's movements.

"Help here! help!" Nieto shouted. "A good stab between the two shoulders of this coyote! There's no fear! He can't move his arms!"

Neither Benito nor Domingo could hear him. Both were pushing their way through the thicket to take Bras d'Acier's men by the flank.

Philip Smithson alone was near Pepe Nieto. Bras d'Acier saw him raise his bowie-knife and he gave Nieto such a jerk that he changed their respective positions. The *vacquero*'s head narrowly escaped the terrible weapon.

A frightful oath expressed the giant's fury.

"Here," cried Nieto to him, "take the end of this lasso—right—now get round a tree with it. Pull tight, so that this coyote can't move! Pull tight, *demonio!*"

"The more I pull the more he hitches toward the tree—that slackens the rope!"

"Well, here, step over us both and catch hold of his feet,

pull him hard against the lasso so he can't stir—have you got them?"

And keeping down Bras d'Acier with his knee and the whole weight of his body, while Philip, increasing the tension of the lasso, completely disabled the prisoner, Pepe Nieto fumbled about his belt for his faithful navaja.

Just then a woman leaned over the two combatants. Pablo felt his arms suddenly freed. Rosina had cut the lasso.

"Damn your eyes!" howled Philip, taking aim at the young woman.

One hand already clutched Nieto's throat, another grasped his belt, and he was hurled against Smithson whose shot was wasted high up in the air.

He dropped his carbine to seize his bowie-knife, but Pablo did not give him time to do so; a bullet from the creole's revolver felled him to the ground, never more to rise again.

As to Nieto, who was now coming, navaja in hand, his excitement made him fail to parry the first thrust of Pablo's machete, and he fell, dying, on the corpse of Philip.

"Thank you, Rosina!" whispered Pablo, with a look of gratitude to the young woman, with whom Cypriana seemed to be expostulating in a very excited manner.

Then, leaping over the bodies of his adversaries, he ran to the rescue of his companions.

At the other end of the caravan, Benito's band had the advantage, thanks to Goliath's prodigious strength. The latter had discharged his carbine on José, but the Mexican had stooped quickly enough for the bullet to pass over his head. Then Tom, seizing his gun by the barrel, had used it as a club. With a first blow he had thrown down poor José, who had wounded him in the thigh with his machete. Then he had knocked over Ribonneau, and would have finished him with a second mighty thump, when Vandeilles, putting his foot on his countryman, threw himself between him and the American.

The giant was now too close to him to use his club; he dropped it and seized his bowie-knife. Unfortunately for Vandeilles, Ribonneau made a sudden effort to rise and well-nigh upset him.

On the other side of the Frenchman, Patsy Green was vainly leveling his rifle at Goliath, afraid as he was of hitting the wrong man.

As to Loïc Kermainguy, in whose charge the horses had been left, he contemplated this murderous encounter with a singular expression on his countenance. It was easy to see how his natural gentleness and his religious notions struggled against the warlike promptings of the old Kymric blood which was beginning to boil in his veins.

He was pale and trembled in his every limb. Not with fear, surely ; for he stood in front of the horses, while he could easily have sheltered himself behind them. His eyes, habitually so meek, were now sparkling.

By his side stood Madame Vandeilles, whose cruel anxiety had made her disregard Pablo's prudent recommendation.

Just as Vandeilles stooped to avoid Goliath's knife and enable Patsy Green to fire, Benito and Domingo came out of the thicket, their faces, hands, and garments torn by the thorns and bedraggled with blood. Both bounded on the Irishman at the same time. A shriek from Madame Vandeilles warned him of the danger, but it was too late already. Benito's machete flashed down on him before he had time to parry the blow ; yet Berthe's cry of anguish had saved his life ; on hearing it Patsy had turned round, and the machete, instead of transpiercing his back, barely grazed his left arm and his side.

In spite of his wound, the Irishman caught his adversary round the body. Domingo rushed to his companion's help, and Vandeilles and Ribonneau combined their strength against Goliath.

"Are you going to stand by and let one brave fellow, a Christian, be murdered by two ruffians?" Berthe whispered in Kermainguy's ear, as she pointed to Patsy. "If you are afraid, let me go!"

"Me afraid!" repeated the little countryman, blushing at the imputation. And with one bound he made for Domingo. The latter drew out his navaja, but a plump header, *à la Bretonne*, full in the chest, sent him sprawling on the ground between Benito's legs.

And now the pugnacious instinct, which at all times exists in the latent state within the breast of the meekest Armorican peasant, was let loose.

"On guard, there!" he cried, as any old Breton knight might have done, unwilling to attack Benito from behind.

The *capataz* turned round, and, stepping aside, caught Kermainguy by his long hair. The latter threw his arms around Benito and held him with all his might, so as not to be overthrown. On the other hand, having to defend himself against the Irishman, Benito was fortunately unable to use his machete against the little Breton.

"Hold on, Benito," cried Goliath, "I am coming to you."

And knocking Ribonneau unconscious with one blow of his improvised club, and wounding Vandeilles in the shoulder with another, he rushed on O'Loughlin.

At the same instant, Pablo appeared on the scene. Goliath cast his eye around him and saw that the game was up for his side. Out of the whole band, Benito and Domingo were the only two he could see in a position to fight. He and they should therefore have to face Pablo, Craddle, Patsy Green, Kermainguy, and likewise Vandeilles, for he was already preparing to get up again.

In one glance the giant realized the situation.

He sprang forward like a tiger, knocked down with the same shock Patsy and Benito, which latter dragged Loïc with him in his fall, and clearing, in one stride, the space which separated him from Madame Vandeilles, he placed the point of his knife against the poor woman's breast.

"Now!" he yelled, "you stir an inch against me, any of you, and she is done for!"

"Wait! Stop!" cried Pablo to his friends. "Let me go forward!"

And he glided along by the side of the ravine until he was face to face with Goliath.

"Ah, I am the master now!" roared Tom, with a fiendish laugh. "Bras d'Acier, tell your men to keep at a distance, and, above all, let them not lay a finger on their guns, or by the living God this woman will be dead before me!"

Pablo stood petrified with horror. The least attempt on his part to move—he might as well plunge that blade into her heart himself—

"What do you ask for?" he gasped at last.

"I want you to let us go, my brother and me, without molesting us."

"Will you pledge yourself not to attack us any more?"

"What would be the use of the promise of a ruffian like me, eh?" sneered Tom. "And, besides, I want to get back

my carbine, that fell there near that devil of an Irishman!"

"To use it against us?"

"I say I want it!"

"Very well," said Pablo, remembering that it was discharged and that he would have time to fire on him if he attempted to load it again. "You have my word—now let go that lady!"

"Not yet awhile. My brother and my carbine first!"

"Don't agree to that, Bras d'Acier," called out Craddle. "He'll surely ask you for something else afterward."

"Do you hear that?" said Pablo to Goliath. "Take my word. There is not a man in California who would not rely on it."

"That may be, but I don't! Here, keep quiet, you there, will you?" continued the giant, addressing Berthe, whom he nearly choked with his left arm.

"You hurt that young lady," said Pablo, pale as death.

"Tut! It'll be a very different thing if you don't agree to my conditions. My bowie-knife will be down in her to the hilt, I take my oath."

"Listen!" exclaimed Bras d'Acier; "if anything happens Madame Vandeilles, before God and on my soul, I swear I will hash you to pieces—you and your brother—and roast you both on my camp fire."

There was such an accent of determination and pent-up wrath in Pablo's voice that Goliath shuddered for once.

"If I take your word in exchange for this woman," he said, in a snarling tone, "who'll bail me that your men will keep to what you agree?"

"I will, myself! For I shall blow out the brain of the first who would attack you."

"And you will leave us our horses and our arms and our provisions?"

"I promise you."

Tom hesitated a moment longer. At last, as if making up his mind reluctantly, he lowered his knife and released Madame Vandeilles.

"Thank you, Monsieur de Verrières," she said to Pablo; and she would fain have told him how deeply she regretted having brought on this frightful issue by her own fault. For had she remained behind the horses, in compliance

with his entreaty, he could have stopped Goliath before the latter had reached her.

"Pass behind me," he whispered to her, "and try to keep in the midst of us for a while."

"Now, my brother?" asked Tom, after Pablo had handed him his carbine.

"He is coming," said Craddle; then he added, in a low voice, "Say, Vandeilles, tell Bras d'Acier Philip is dead, and let him be on the alert when Goliath sees the corpse."

A minute later the body of Philip Smithson was passed from hand to hand right up to Bras d'Acier, who, until he received Craddle's timely message, was not aware that the bandit had already succumbed to the wound he had inflicted on him. Silently he handed the dead man to his elder brother, carefully keeping his carbine in readiness.

Tom laid his brother on the ground and knelt by his side. Seeing he did not stir, he placed his hand on his side; the heart no longer pulsated; Philip was but a corpse.

The giant leaped to his feet in a perfect frenzy of despair.

"He's dead!" he yelled. "He's dead! You've killed him!"

And grasping his carbine by the barrel, he made a dart on Pablo.

The creole's rifle was already leveled at him.

"One step nearer and you are a dead man!" he said to the infuriated creature.

"You have deceived me!"

"I did not know your brother was dead. And besides, what—"

"Oh, I'll murder you all!" interrupted Tom, wringing his arms with desperation.

"My brother! My poor brother!"

And so saying, he would throw himself on the corpse, and kiss it over and over again.

The wretch's grief was so real that the by-standers, despite the abomination in which he was so deservedly held, were moved by the sight.

"Shall we help you to dig a grave for him?" suggested Bras d'Acier.

"No!" thundered the giant. "I want nothing from you! My curse on all of you!"

Thereupon he slung his gun over one shoulder, loaded his brother on the other, and walked slowly away.

Pablo and Patsy Green followed him, lest he should disperse the horses. Scared by the tumult and the shots, the poor animals had run away to a somewhat wider part of the cañada, some two hundred paces further.

Goliath went up to the mustang that Benito had given him, and fastened Philip's body tightly across on the saddle with a rope; then mounting another, he drove Philip's horse before him with a lasso by way of a long bridle.

"My curse on you! My curse on you again!" he cried, turning round on his saddle, to hurl this last imprecation at his foes.

CHAPTER XVI.

A COURT-MARTIAL AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

BRAS D'ACIER and his Irish companion still kept their eyes on their departing foe for a distance of five or six gunshots; then they gathered the horses together and were preparing to bring them back to the main body of the miners, when they noticed them coming toward them.

"What is it?" inquired Pablo, running on to meet them.

"Nothing fresh," answered Craddle; "only we considered we should have more elbow room out here to question our prisoners and square up their little account. Right where we were, there was not room for two coons to hold a confab."

"How many prisoners have we?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"Two, not to speak of the women."

Surprised at the difficulty with which these words were spoken, the creole instinctively looked at Craddle's lips and perceived that he spat blood.

"It's nothing, Bras d'Acier," said the Yankee, anticipating Pablo's question. "This darned Goliath gave me such an Ar pounder in the chest with the wrong end of his rifle that a weaker breastplate than mine would have let in the daylight; that's settled! But I have stood many another, I reckon!"

"Where is José?" further inquired Pablo, who had been looking for the little Mexican in vain.

"The poor fellow is dead, or the next thing to it," Vandeilles made answer. "My wife is with him yonder."

"Let me pass," said Pablo. "I must go see him. We shall see about the prisoners later on."

The miners drew aside and let him push his way to where José had been stretched on the ground.

Madame Vandeilles and Loïc Kermainguy were kneeling near him. Berthe held his head on her knees; Loïc kept his body slightly raised from the ground and muttered a few words of prayer.

"José," whispered Bras d'Acier, as he, too, knelt near the Mexican and took his hand.

José half opened his eyes, already staring and without fire, and made an effort to look at the newcomer.

"Bras d'Acier!" he murmured.

"Yes, José, it is I, my poor friend. What can I do for you?"

José tried to shake his head.

"Nothing," he answered, faintly. "I know all about wounds—within an hour from now—"

He said no more, but Pablo guessed his meaning but too readily.

"We must hope on still," he replied, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"No," said the wounded man. "You will get prayers said for me, won't you?"

"I promise you. Half of the share you were to have in this expedition will be devoted to it, unless you have anybody to whom I could hand the money."

"I have a child, Don Pablo."

"Where is he?"

"At Tehuantepec, with his aunt, the sister of my wife."

"What is her name?"

"Juanita Osorio."

"Very well. She shall have what I promised you. As to the prayers, I shall pay for them myself. Have you nothing else to ask me?"

"No, Pablo—give my machete and my horse to this—"

He was unable to finish his sentence; but his eyes were turned to Loïc Kermainguy, who had just held out a little

crucifix to him and mingled his tears with his prayers by the side of the dying man.

There was a moment's silence. José was making desperate efforts to speak, but life was ebbing fast.

He was heard, or rather he was seen, murmuring :

"My God, have mercy on me ! forgive me !"

At last he pressed the little cross on his lips, stammered a few words, which could not be heard, then heaved a deep sigh—it was his last.

"Poor José !" said Pablo, burying his face in his two hands. "He was brave and true. May God grant him peace !"

And all the miners, who had by this time gathered around, knelt and bowed their heads in the presence of death. Loïc raised his voice in prayer for all of them ; and when he had finished, they dug a grave in which they laid their regretted companion.

"Now that we have buried poor José," remarked Craddle, as soon as the mournful ceremony was completed, "we have to do what justice demands with his murderers."

"Let us wait a little longer," answered Bras d'Acier, "we are so badly situated here. Just one mile from this we shall find a wider opening, where we can pitch our tents for the night and hold our council."

"Let us be off to it at once, then !" cried Ribonneau.

"Keep an eye on the prisoners," recommended Pablo.

"Have no uneasiness on that point, friend, and bet your last dollar on me," said Craddle.

The spot was quickly reached. It was a kind of semi-circle formed by a natural scoop-out of the left flank of the cañada.

"We must spend the night here, said Pablo ; you had better get supper ready."

"Do you know that if the Indians attacked us right here, we should be caught just as in a cellar?" remarked Craddle.

"We cannot possibly help it," replied Bras d'Acier. "It would take us fully six hours to get out of this defile ; our wounded men are utterly incapable of covering such a distance, nor could the others do it either—they are too tired."

"That's true," said Craddle. "Still, I should give a good deal to be safe out of this darned hole !"

"And wouldn't I, too !" exclaimed Ribonneau.

"Suppose, first and foremost, we'd get rid of the black-

guards that murdered poor José (God rest his soul)," suggested Patsy Green.

"Hang them right away!" cried Craddle and Vandeilles.

"Let us give them a trial first," said Pablo.

All sat down on the grass in the semi-circular recess; in the middle sat Bras d'Acier, on whose features the deepest anxiety was depicted.

Benito and Domingo were brought forward. Craddle and Patsy Green had firmly "roped them up" at the close of the encounter and had since then compelled them to walk on before them, giving them a taste of what the Yankee had already described as "the wrong end" of a rifle, at the least suspicious move they made.

Indeed Benito would have been quite unable to run away, even under more favorable auspices.

When Goliath had so suddenly left the *melée*, the *capataz*, now almost by himself against several adversaries and already suffering from a knife wound, made an attempt at seeking refuge in the thicket; but Patsy had "landed him such a darlint of a whack" right across the knees with his gun that he had instantly fallen to the ground, calling out that his leg was broken.

The wound proved to be not so serious as Benito had believed; yet his knee was considerably swollen; and what with this and the loss of blood he had previously sustained, he could not have gone very far. Still, while Domingo, who had received the merest scratch, appeared before his judges with the contrite look of a converted sinner, it was with a bold and arrogant air the *capataz* limped up in their presence.

It was evident to Pablo, if to nobody else, that the unprincipled fellow was in possession of some scheme, some satanic secret imparted to him perhaps by Goliath, of which he would avail himself forthwith if the opportunity presented itself.

What infinite mischief might not be wrought by his false heart and tongue during the few moments that this court-martial would last! Doubtless the giant had told his friend what an ever-ready firebrand at his disposal was Vandeilles's peculiar temperament; and the mischief, once done, what then?

In truth, no trial was needed for the lying traitor who

was the immediate cause of this day's horrible butchery, and of the no less horrible dangers which the survivors had escaped. But here, again, Pablo's nobler self rebelled against striking in cold blood a disarmed enemy—and that enemy the husband of Rosina, too.

"Poor Rosina," he mused to himself, "I have caused her so much grief already! What a return this would be for her saving my life, as she did a while ago!"

And meanwhile, yonder, beyond a group of horses, Cypriana was expostulating and gesticulating with her late mistress.

"Come, Doña Rosina, come! you must save them, you must. Go and beg mercy for them. It is the least this Bras d'Acier might do for you!"

"He may grant me only Benito's life!"

"And Domingo's, too, he must! Do you hear, Doña Rosina, he must—or else I—"

"Or else?"

"Or else I tell Benito that I saw you cut the lasso round Bras d'Acier's arms and saving his life. Then you'll have to let Benito swing with Domingo; for if he was spared, the first thing he would do would be to stab you dead!"

"Would to God, I felt his navaja going through my breast this instant! How glad I should die, if that could buy him off without my having to beg his life from Bras d'Acier."

"Why?"

"What is that to you?"

"There is Bras d'Acier walking up and down!" gasped Cypriana, as if expecting a sudden resolve on his part. "For the love of the Virgin Mary, Doña Rosina, save Benito and Domingo!"

Rosina heaved a sigh, silently moved toward Pablo as he passed behind the miners, and laid her hand softly on his shoulder.

He turned round smartly.

"Rosina?" he murmured.

"Benito is the father of my child," she said. "By saving your life, I have endangered his. If he dies, I shall follow him to the tomb. Pablo, I beseech you—"

Pablo took her hand and pressed it.

"He shall live, I promise you."

"And Domingo, too?"

"Why Domingo?"

"His life must be spared, too, Don Pablo, on my account. Do not ask me why. Take my word for it that it must be."

"It shall be, then."

And with a heartfelt, "I thank you, Pablo!" the young woman walked away, hiding her face in the folds of her rebozo, while Pablo returned to the council.

"Well?" exclaimed Vandeilles. "When do we get on with this business?"

"I have just given my word that the lives of these two men would be spared," answered Bras d'Acier.

For once, a murmur of disappointment arose in the ranks of the creole's men. He calmly cast around him a stern look of authority. All became silent.

"When we started for this expedition," he said, "every man made his own terms and claimed certain advantages for himself. I alone, who am now guiding you to a treasure which I might have kept for myself, I alone asked for nothing. Is the life of these two prisoners too large a share of profits for me to claim?"

"No, it is not!" the miners felt compelled to admit, notwithstanding their evident vexation.

"What shall we do with them, then?" inquired Craddle. Therein lay another difficulty.

Abandoning Benito and Domingo, in their present condition, was exposing them to an almost certain death, as well as Rosina, who would not have parted from them. Besides, they might fall into the hands of the Indians, and give them such information as would bring them at once on the track of the caravan.

Bringing them along, on the other hand, presented other obstacles. It was initiating them to the road that the miners had to follow so as to reach their placer in the shortest possible time, in other words, acquainting them with their projects. And when they would be set free at last, what might not be feared from their indiscretion or perhaps their direct action in the event of their finding others to aid and abet them?

"Well?" Vandeilles queried once more.

"Move back the prisoners a little," said Bras d'Acier, "so that they may not hear what we say—Right!—That's

far enough. Now listen to me. The moment we refrain from killing these two men, there is but one course to pursue with them."

"Which?" asked Ribonneau.

"Adjoin them to us."

"And to our profits?" was the indignant exclamation, uttered by all.

"Your individual shares will not suffer by it as much as you seem to think."

"How do you make that out?" asked Vandeilles, angrily.

"Poor Mundiaz is dead. He left no widow or children. His share is vacant."

"We should have divided it among ourselves," said Craddle.

"And what about Loïc Kermainguy?" suggested Patsy Green.

"He shall have his share, too," replied Bras d'Acier.

"And the half-share you promised José for his child?" added Craddle.

"That is a sacred debt; it shall be paid before any of the others."

"Then, there will be nothing left for us," grumbled some voices.

"You think only of the results," began the creole, "and not of the means to achieve it. Bear in mind,—will you?—that we are already two men short, not to mention that most of you are wounded. Several of you will not be in a condition to work or to fight for a good fortnight at least. Meanwhile, if the Indians were to attack us, as is but too probable after all the shots we fired, would it not be better to be satisfied with a seventh, nay with a tenth part of the treasure, than lose it all when we are within reach of it?"

To these and other similar arguments Craddle was the first to surrender. Patrick O'Loughlin and Vandeilles were the last to yield. The Irishman could not forgive the death of his chum, José Guerino. Vandeilles, whose intimate objections lay, in reality, against a further partitioning of his gold, made a ludicrous display of his desire to avenge the kidnapping of his wife. In the end, however, both of them gave way to the preponderant opinion, but they did so with evident regret. Indeed, Patsy Green went the length of stating that "the devil a reason he saw at

all, at all, for giving the heathens a chance out of hell's blazes," and that, if he agreed to it, it was to please Bras d'Acier.

In accordance with the compact entered into at San Francisco, Bras d'Acier might have simply imposed his will, without discussing his motives in any way ; but, on all important occasions, he preferred winning his men over to his personal opinion ; and in this instance in particular he was especially desirous that the reprieve granted to the vacqueros should not seem as if coming from him alone and against the wish of his companions.

All being now of one mind, Pablo ordered the prisoners to be brought back.

"Just ask them what the deuce put it into their heads to carry off my wife, will you?" asked Vandeilles, with a frown.

Pablo feigned not to hear the request, and at once proceeded to announce to the Mexicans that their lives would be spared and that they would be permitted to join the caravan.

Bound up and wounded though he was, Domingo leaped for joy at the unexpected tidings.

"Long life to Bras d'Acier!" he shouted. "May God preserve the king of the placers!"

Benito greeted Pablo's words more coolly, and immediately began searching in his distrustful mind what might be the motive of such leniency. Should Bras d'Acier have read in his eyes the threat of the infamous revenge he had planned, one shot of his revolver, one stab of his machete would have been a much readier way to settle that question. In the creole's place, Benito felt sure he would not have hesitated for one second.

Be that as it might, however, life was not so bad after all but he might resign himself to accept it at any risk ; and accordingly he returned his thanks to Bras d'Acier with that dignified manner which is sometimes found in the very lowest of Spanish or Mexican beggars.

"One word more," said Pablo. "The only thing we ask of your companions and of you, in exchange for what we do now, is a promise that you will live with us loyally and faithfully, and that you will comply, like the members of our band, with all my instructions. Do you swear it?"

"I do with my two hands!" cried Domingo.

"And you, Benito?"

"So do I," answered the latter, with more circumspection, "provided you treat us as *caballeros* should be treated."

On hearing the haughty reply from the lips of the half-caste, Pablo could with difficulty repress a smile of contempt at being thus reminded of his first meeting with him.

"Benito," he said, looking fixedly at the *capataz*. "Let the past be forgotten. Union is, just now, an essential condition of our success. We are nearing the end of our journey. Let nothing trouble the harmony of our efforts, or throw discord among us."

"You are right," answered Benito, meeting the gaze of the creole with a significant glance; "I shall keep a guard on my lips."

CHAPTER XVII.

AT SYMPATHY'S SHRINE—UNDER A DEMON'S BREATH.

DURING the discussion that had taken place between Pablo and his men, Berthe had at last succeeded in approaching Rosina just as the latter returned from begging her husband's life at the hands of Bras d'Acier. From the moment she had recognized her, Madame Vandeuilles had endeavored to speak to her, but poor Rosina seemed to flee her friend and unsuspecting rival of former days.

"Did you not recognize me, Rosina?" she asked in her kindest voice. "Why, it would almost look as if you shunned me; let us sit down here and have a little chat. Don't turn your eyes away from me in that way; you will make me imagine you are angry with me."

Rosina yielded, and the two women sat in the shelter of a tree.

"How often I have thought of you and your kind people, since I left San Fernando," said Berthe, "and of the home I found among you—Rosina—will you not speak to me?—Rosina, oh say, what have I done to you?"

This time the tearful voice melted the heart of Rosina. She burst into tears.

"Berthe, Berthe," she sobbed, "I was choking—I could not speak—Oh, did you but know how wretched I am!"

"Wretched, Rosina? Is your husband unkind to you?"

"Do not name him, Berthe!" came out like burning fire from her trembling lips. "Oh, how cruelly God has punished me for giving way to a feeling of despair! I must tell you all, Berthe. Here, take my hands in yours, so, but do not look at me thus, let me blush unknown to you. Now, listen! You know, Berthe, how I loved Monsieur de Verrières; yet no, you could not know how madly I loved him; and at one time I foolishly thought that he, too—that was before you came to our house, Berthe. Oh, how often I cursed you!"

"Still you know, Rosina—"

"Yes, I know all, I know you were innocent of my misery; but I suffered such agony! He saw no one or nothing but you. He followed you wherever you went. When I would see those large dark eyes of his gazing on you so lovingly, I could have killed you, Berthe. I was mad! Still, I would not believe what I saw; I would hope on against hope, for I knew the dreaded truth would break my heart. Then came Madame de Verrières's death. He went away, you remember; and during his absence, Monsieur de Mareuil suddenly reappeared and took you away. How I longed and prayed in our little chapel for Pablo's return! At last, one day I saw him far away on the hill. He rode his handsome gray horse, and was coming toward the hacienda like the wind."

"My poor mother is no more!" said he to me.

"We consoled him, my mother and I, as best we could. Each one of his tears burnt my very heart. I would fain have been his wife to kiss them away from his cheeks.

"While speaking, he kept on looking about him.

"Where is Madame de Mareuil?" he said at last.

"She is gone," I answered. "Her husband came for her."

"He grew pale as death.

"Her husband?" he repeated. "I thought he was dead long since."

"He was thought to be dead, but it was an error," I began.

"He stood up almost immediately, and hardly listened to my further explanations. He looked quite bewildered, and

as though barely conscious of what he was doing. My mother and I stared mournfully at each other. He left the room. I dared not follow him, and threw myself crying into my mother's arms. Suddenly I heard the furious galloping of a horse. I rushed to the window just in time to see Pablo disappear. Stefano was there, looking after him, stupefied.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"God knows. I am afraid his mother's death has turned his head," said old Stefano.

"Did he say nothing?"

"He asked me which way Monsieur and Madame de Mareuil had gone, he threw me this gold piece and flew away."

"I know not what I said in answer; my poor head was gone. God had forsaken me. I ran to my room, wrote a few lines which I left on my table, and then, Berthe, forgetting Heaven and my poor mother, I rushed into the lake where he and I had so often spent such pleasant hours."

Here poor Rosina paused. Berthe, who held her in her arms, felt her whole frame shuddering.

"Oh, why did I survive that night!" she resumed, with an outburst of savage despair. "Here, let me tell you quick, or I shall never tell you all. There was, in my father's household a *capataz*, named Benito—"

"Benito?"

"Yes, Benito. And I had frequently noticed how he looked at me in a peculiar way; but I had paid no attention to him; how could I?—a half-breed! Well, Berthe, the wretch had seen me throwing myself into the lake; he came after me, and saved me—saved me, Berthe, from one death into another!—The rest I only know from hearsay, for my poor brain had given way. How he had concealed my rescue and stolen me away to his mother's cabin far up in the mountains, how I had long hovered between life and death and was now doomed never to face my father's home again, I only heard many a long month after. Three seasons had come and gone, almost a year had passed away since I lay there fever-stricken, they said, when I awoke to real life again. In the early gloom of that long sleep I had had a horrible dream of a wedding ceremony performed by a priest near a bed of sickness, between four squalid walls.

Oh, Berthe, when my eyes could see again and I became conscious once more, I saw a ring on my finger and a little babe in a cradle by my side !—”

“Rosina !” Benito was heard to cry.

The two women started, and saw the *capataz*, who had endeavored to limp up to them unawares, sitting down a few paces from where they were, unable to walk any further.

Rosina looked up to Berthe, and having received, in answer to her mute appeal, the assurance that her secret would be kept safe in her friend's affectionate heart, she left her and joined her husband.

“Whatever were you babbling to that French woman ?” he asked her.

“I was telling her my life,” she answered calmly, sitting down near him.

Relieved by the outpouring of her sorrows into Berthe's bosom and by the abundant tears she had shed, poor Rosina felt her heart less oppressed; although, like the reopening of an old wound, this confession embittered her the more against her husband.

Still, obeying, as if in spite of herself, to that instinct of charity which God has placed in the very essence of woman, she immediately set about dressing his wound.

“What's the use ?” he said bitterly, pushing her hand away; “I can dress it myself. It is too great a sacrifice for a white woman like you to stoop down and dress the wound of a half-bred wretch like me, even when—”

“Don't speak like that, Benito. It is never from me such reproaches come ! You know how readily I went about—”

“*Demonio !*” interrupted Benito, who could not manage to fasten his bandage as he wished.

Loïc Kermainguy had been watching the unsuccessful attempts of the *capataz* from a short distance, and came nearer on hearing his angry exclamation.

“Would you like me to help you ?” he inquired.

“Mind your own business !” was the coarse reply the Breton received ; but without the faintest semblance of having heard a single word, he knelt down by the side of the man who gave him so cordial a greeting, took hold of his leg and began rolling the strip of linen around it with all the skill of a surgeon's aid.

Benito looked with a strange air of surprise at the gentle, peaceful face before him, and unconsciously contrasted it with the repulsive appearance of those he daily associated with.

"Why, you positively look as if you had spent your life in the wards of a hospital," he said, in a softer tone of voice.

"I often went with the marquis's old housekeeper on her rounds of sick calls," answered Loïc, "and many a time, too, I carried the basket of the Sisters of Charity in Douarnenez."

"Eh, *Capa de Dios*, 'Sisters of Charity'! What are they like?"

Kermainguy explained in a few words.

"Those women are not like other women, then, aren't they?" mused Benito aloud, at the same time turning his eyes on Rosina, who was helping Loïc. "They nurse the poor as well as the rich, the peasant and the hidalgo alike."

"They are in God's service, and before Him there is no such thing as rank or fortune."

"Still, in the case of a negro or an Indian?"

"What matters to God the color of a suffering man?"

"Well, an enemy, then?"

"You were mine not so long ago. That was no reason why I should not do you this little good turn.—Now, that's fixed up. Good evening, sir: good evening, madame."

"What a singular chap!" murmured Benito, as he watched him going away.—"What are you thinking of?" he suddenly asked his wife, who sat silent and thoughtful. "Did you hear what that young French fellow said?"

"I did. He is a good-hearted, generous man."

"I reckon he is. It seems he can forgive, *he* can!—What are you muttering there?"

"Nothing."

"Your tongue was a sight more nimble with your Madame Vandeuilles a while ago. She is an acquaintance of yours, likely?"

"She is."

"Where did you meet her?"

"At San Fernando."

"If so, how is it you are not acquainted with her husband as well?"

"I am. I met him at San Fernando also."

"*Capa de Dios*, why did you not tell me before?"

"I never told you I was not. I said nothing at all, so as not to excite your jealous temper."

"And that other fellow, that Bras d'Acier?"

"I know him, too. His real name is Pablo de Verrières."

"Pablo de Verrières!" exclaimed Benito, starting on his feet in spite of his wound. "What! the man you were so fond of?"

"Yes—where are you going?"

"Where am I going? *Caramba*, I am going to stick my navaja in his cursed breast."

"He is a stronger man than you. You would do well to think twice about it. Besides *he* never loved me, if I loved him."

"You lie!"

"Noble *caballero*!"

Benito winced under the sneer. He resumed his seat, as though suffering from a pain in his leg.

"In any case," he grumbled, "one of us two is too much in this world. As soon as I am strong enough to handle my machete, I'll settle your Pablo!"

Rosina made no answer, and he, who was her husband, appeared to fall in a dark reverie.

"*Voto al Demonio*!" he exclaimed suddenly, striking the ground with his clenched fist. "And so, you were all agreed to deceive me?"

"I had simply asked them to keep silent."

"Why do you tell me now?"

"Hypocrisy crushes me down. I never could have kept it up to the end of the journey."

"Do you know I had a great mind to murder you, just one second ago, when you told me you had come to an agreement with that Pablo to deceive me?"

"I saw it in your eye."

"And you did not stir?"

Rosina shrugged her shoulders.

There was in her gesture and in the expression of her countenance so utter a disregard of life that Benito's passion melted away before her indifference. He bowed his head and the usual revolution took place in his feelings.

"Since she tells me all that openly," he thought to him-

self, "it is a sure sign she has no intention of deceiving me. I paid her back a funny way for being so outspoken!"

And five minutes later he was at her knees begging her forgiveness for his violent ways.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN SIGHT OF THE PROMISED LAND.

THE following day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the miners made their way at last out of the cañada, and found themselves once more in open country.

Around them stretched an immense plain. In front, on the distant horizon, stood a chain of mountains.

"That is the Sierra del Zatecas," said Pablo. "It is on the other side of those mountains that our placer lies."

A joyful hurrah arose from the caravan.

"Do not rejoice too soon," he quickly added. "We are not there yet. It will take us at least four days to reach the foot of the Sierra and ascend it. And then we shall have the most dangerous part of our journey to go through."

"Why so?" asked Craddle.

"There is no track or trail, and the soil is very bad for the horses."

"We shall hold them up," said Ribonneau.

"And again, if there be Indians about these parts, it is there, of course, they will lie in wait."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Vandeilles. "We are too near port now not to land safely. Now that the spot where fortune awaits us is there before my eyes, I imagine that five hundred Indians would not hinder me from getting at it!"

"Nor us either!" exclaimed the miners.

Pablo replied by giving the signal for the start. He was far from sharing this general feeling of self-confidence, and his greatest source of anxiety was the very composition of his troop and the lack of real union among his men. In truth, one single word might upset everything. A fit of jealousy on the part of Benito or of despair on that of Rosina; an ill-timed remark from busy-body Ribonneau; an outburst of Vandeilles's passion; a quarrel between the

two new-comers and their late enemies—the merest accident,—might arm them straightway against each other.

And what would it be at the mines, when the bosom of mother earth had been laid bare and the glitter of the precious metal would kindle some of the least uncontrollable passions of man? Despite their promised obedience to Pablo's commands, despite the contract they had pledged themselves to before starting, the other miners did not contemplate without envy the large share attributed to Vandeilles. Unmindful of the conditions on which alone they had been admitted, they now thought of nothing but the outcome of their expedition and looked upon themselves as wronged to the amount of Vandeilles's surplus over them.

Bras d'Acier possessed too thorough a knowledge of men not to anticipate this result, but he could not help it in any way. He should take men as they were, with their faults and their good points, and rest satisfied with keeping a constant watch against discord among his companions as well as against attack on the part of his enemies.

On the other hand, if the Indians were on the warpath they should sooner or later come across the track of the Europeans. This was a foregone conclusion. The only open question was whether they would turn out to be friendly or hostile tribes. The latter, unfortunately, seemed the more probable event.

Again, should Goliath manage to make his way back to San Francisco, or fall in with those lawless adventurers that swarm about California, his cupidity and thirst for revenge would make him lead his new allies directly to the Placer del Desierto.

Berthe had now become Rosina's almost constant companion; Cypriana, fallen for this very reason from the post she had assumed with her mistress, felt bitterly the solitude in which she was now left; she cursed the French woman in her heart and only waited an opportunity to show how deep was her hatred for her.

Not very different¹ were the thoughts of vengeance entertained by Benito toward Bras d'Acier. The other miners keeping away from him owing to his mixed origin, he usually remained with Domingo, sometimes with Loïc Kermainguy. The latter, however, felt in greatest sympathy with Patrick O'Loughlin and seldom left him; and as

the Celt never went away from Madame Vandeilles, his young Kymric brother soon became the "knight in attendance" of her companion Rosina.

The Breton's *naïveté*, his outspoken speech, and his strange ways, had a peculiar charm for the two women, who were in sad need of a recreation of some sort. He sang Breton Christmas carols for them or told them tales out of saints' lives, to the great delight of Patsy, who would have stayed up all night listening to his legends.

"Say, young fellow, I guess you have fallen in love with my wife, eh?" Benito called out to him one evening, when he was helping Rosina to dismount.

"You mean me!" exclaimed Kermainguy, blushing, as was his wont, from ear to ear. "Me?"

And instantly letting go the bridle of Rosina's horse, he walked off furiously. Benito ran after him.

"Come back, you idiot!" he shouted. "Did you not see I was only joking. Stop with her, I'll only be too glad, you fool! Here, let us shake hands over it. There! Now, do go back to Rosina. She'll sulk with me till to-morrow if you don't."

It required a considerable amount of pressing, however, and Rosina's own intervention, to induce Loïc to resume his post.

On the eighth day, at noon, the foot of the Sierra Zatecas was reached.

It was agreed they should halt here for a good rest previous to commencing the ascension at daybreak next morning.

"By to-morrow evening," said Pablo, "if God enables us to climb up the mountain without any mishap, we shall perceive the Rio del Desierto and the auriferous rocks. May He watch over us till then!"

PART III.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT WORK.

THE Sierra Zatecas spreads out its pine-clad peaks between the Deer's River and the Mill's River, which both flow into the Sacramento. About the middle of its length the mountain alters its course and describes a kind of obtuse angle opening toward the Sacramento. Here, strange-shaped, gloomy-looking rocks spring up from the ground amid the trees. A hundred yards further in the direction of the river stands the peñon del Desierto.

It would seem as though nature, while a prey to some terrible convulsion, had wrenched this hillock from the mountain side and hurled it away to where it now lies. The slope of the peñon opposite to the elbow of the chain offers no signs of vegetation but brushwood and a few stunted oaks, struggling here and there between rocks of quartz and slate. On the other side, on the contrary, trees of every kind, and, especially, magnificent pines, lift their green summits to the skies. The valley, which starts from the foot of the peñon and stretches all along the sierra, is watered by numerous streams, which in the winter season roll down from the mountain as foamy torrents. One of these water courses springs from the very apex of the Sierra Zatecas just at the angle spoken of above, comes down to the plateau, and skirts it all around, along the sinuous base of the mountain. After which it falls into the valley and joins the other streams.

The narrow pass leading from the sierra to this valley is so embedded between rocks and gigantic trees that the peñon is invisible until the foot of the mountain is reached.

The road (let us use the word for want of another)—the road emerges on to the valley in front of the peñon, so that, in order to get to the plateau, the traveler must take to the

right, climb up one side of the peñon and then go down the other.

A week after the death of Philip and poor José, the band under Bras d'Acier's leadership saw the valley lying before them at last.

"That is the Peñon del Desierto," said Pablo, pointing the hillock to them.

At this joyful announcement, all fatigue was forgotten, the peñon was climbed with panting eagerness, and a quarter of an hour later the miners were in sight of the plateau.

"Now, halt here and take a short rest," said Bras d'Acier.

"A rest !" cried Vandeilles, "when we are within arm's reach of the treasures you promised us !"

"Well, wait for me a few minutes at least. I must go and reconnoiter the ground."

"I'll go with you," suggested Vandeilles.

"No ! I wish to be alone."

And so saying, he slowly made his way toward the plateau. There he stood still, casting his eye around him as if trying to recognize the land ; then they saw him walking straight to a little quartz rock, the apex of which barely peeped above the ground.

In five minutes' time, without any other tool than his barreta, Pablo had dug a hole around this rock to a depth of a couple of feet. There, the soil, which was reddish on the surface, assumed a gray tint, recalling the color of ashes. The *gambusino* examined the rock for a while, and then attacked it vigorously with his barreta. At the third blow he knocked off a piece of quartz, put it in his pocket, and for some time remained motionless, his arms folded and resting on his barreta, his eyes staring at the ground, evidently buried in a deep reverie.

"What can he be musing over ?" wondered the miners, who were watching him with a very natural anxiety.

At last the dreamer shook his head, passed his hand over his forehead as though to drive some painful thought away, and with one last, long look around him, he slowly returned to his companions.

"Well ?" inquired Ribonneau, Vandeilles, and Domingo, all at the one time.

"The bonanza is before you."

"Long live Bras d'Acier !" hurrahed the miners ; and in

their enthusiasm they threw their hats up in the air, and flung their arms about each other's necks like so many children.

"The piece of quartz you knocked off a while ago contains gold?" asked Craddle.

"It does," said Pablo; and presenting it to Madame Vandeilles with a graceful bow, "Madame," he added, "permit me to offer you the first fruit of this placer. May it prove as rich as I wish it to be, and compensate you for all the dangers and fatigues you have had to brave in order to reach it."

"I thank you, Don Pablo," murmured Berthe, deeply affected.

"You there, wait a moment!" he then called to the miners, who were already rushing to the plateau, barreta and pick-ax in hand. "Before we commence, let us return thanks to God for having brought us thus far. Let us ask Him to bless our labors, and grant us a safe return home. Let us pray Him, too, for those unfortunate companions of ours who have succumbed before reaching the end of this journey."

The miners took off their hats and knelt on the rocky soil, but their prayer was of short duration. Devoured with impatient curiosity, they could not turn their eyes away from the gold-bearing spot that Pablo had just indicated to them.

In a few seconds they were up again, and away in the direction of the placer. After a moment's hesitation, arising from a transient struggle between his pride and his curiosity, Loïc himself had gone, too, but with less trepidation and with a certain dignity.

Berthe, Rosina, and Pablo were left alone. A sad smile curled the creole's lips, as he saw those men rushing to the gold as a pack of famished hounds panting after their quarry.

Presently, raising his eyes to the sky, he noticed that the sun had already run two thirds of his course, and he deemed it wise to tarry there no longer.

By the time he had brought his two companions down to the plateau, the miners had collected a number of pieces of quartz in which sparkled little scales of gold, and they ran up to him with them. A more skillful observer, and more

experienced than the others, Craddle had already gathered several nuggets, one of which might have weighed up to three or four ounces.

"That is enough for to-day," said Bras d'Acier to them.

"Why, we have four hours' daylight still!" wisely suggested the whilom soap-dealer from Marseilles.

"Quite so," replied he, "but we must avail ourselves of it for something more urgent just now than gold-digging. We have to build a house for ourselves. Where should we put up our gold and our provisions? At any moment we may be discovered by the Indians. In a month or six weeks miners will be coming to the placers in crowds, and the bushrangers will make their appearance at the same time. Our camp must be ready, and, in any case, it will not take more than seven or eight days' work."

Against this there was naught to say, and the works were immediately taken in hand.

The huts were placed with their backs to the hill, so as to be protected against the north wind. Young oak trees were cut down to make posts with which a long rectangle was described. A second row of posts was then planted parallel to the first, and about two feet away from it. Strong boughs were intertwined horizontally between the posts, so as to form an inner and an outer hurdle, and the space between them was filled with stones and soil right up to a man's height. Other branches, closely packed together and covered over with foliage, did duty for a roof. Two bison's hides were, moreover, stretched and fastened down on the roof of the cabin intended for Mr. and Mrs. Vandeilles. Adjacent to this, another had been erected for Benito and Rosina, very much in the same manner, though with less care, for although Bras d'Acier had kept an eye to its construction, his companions had displayed far more zeal when the comfort of "the little lady" was in question than when Benito was concerned.

The hut which was to be used for the other miners was placed next to that of the Mexican couple. As to Pablo, he constructed for himself, with a few poles and three hides, a kind of wigwam right in front of Vandeilles's house, so that no one could go in unknown to him. He took Loïc Kermainguy with him; for the poor fellow was frequently teased by Ribonneau, Craddle, and the two Mexi-

cans, and deeply resented at times their coarse sneering at his religious habits and his simple-minded remarks.

And when, at last, these preliminary labors were completed, gold-digging was commenced in thorough earnestness.

Had each man been working for himself, there would have been no lack of energy displayed, but the thought of the enormous share reserved for Vandeilles cooled, to a considerable extent, the ardor of his co-workers.

Vandeilles himself gave them a bad example. His lazy temperament was beginning to show itself again. He quietly looked on at the others working, and carelessly smoked his pipe, as though the result of their labors was nothing to him.

"Say, does he take us for his servants?" Craddle would often ask, ill-humoredly.

In truth it was on him that the brunt of the work mostly fell, as not one of his mates could handle a pick-ax or, more especially, the utensil from which he had derived his nickname, as well as he did. Patsy Green did his best to help him, but his mother had always said of him that he was "all thumbs and no fingers barrin' when he'd land one straight from the shoulder fair on the nose of one of the constabulary force." Benito and Domingo were, by nature, very averse to work, and could not keep at it for two hours together. As to Ribonneau, he worked by fits and starts, and never failed to come and have a chat with friend Vandeilles the moment the latter gave up working.

In consequence of the nature of the soil and the hardness of the rock, it soon became very difficult to work the first lay indicated by Bras d'Acier. At the same time it must be said that this bonanza had already yielded, in very little time, close on twenty thousand dollars.

"Now we must use powder," said Craddle; "we'll get on quicker."

"We must wait to the last moment for that," answered Pablo. "The noise might draw the Indians in our direction."

"And meanwhile," inquired Vandeilles, "must we keep still, with folded arms?"

"As to that sort of business, I guess you'd lick any coon in creation," sneered Craddle.

"Well, so long as it suits me," retorted Vandeilles, haughtily.

"But I reckon it would just about suit everybody else as well," replied the Yankee. "Do you consider it's for my pleasure I break my old back at this here work?—especially for what I'll get out of it for myself. If there's a man here that ought to work what I call 'tough,' it's surely you! While, damn your eyes, there you squat, and squint at us slaving, just as if you were the boss of this here plantation!"

"I do what I like," said Vandeilles; "and let me tell you I'll stand none of your talk."

"That's enough," interrupted Bras d'Acier, in his authoritative tone of voice, "I have something to say to you. The bonanza we have been working here is not the only treasure of the peñon. At the foot of the mountain, just where the torrent falls on the plateau, it must have deposited a certain number of nuggets, detached from the side of the sierra. This gold is merely covered over with a layer of sand; we can easily get it by cradling. And thus we shall avoid both the trouble of the dry process and the dangers presented by the use of gunpowder."

A murmur of satisfaction greeted this communication, and in an instant the miners were making for the bed of the torrent, but once again they were checked by their leader.

"This time," he said, "I insist on the work being organized regularly, and so that each one will have his task fixed beforehand."

"Bravo!" shouted Craddle, O'Loughlin, and the Mexicans.

"There must be four men at the cradle," continued Pablo. "You shall all have your turn at it, two by two. Vandeilles, Ribonneau, Patsy, and Domingo will begin. Then Craddle and Benito will take the place of the first two, and these again will relieve Patsy and Domingo at the end of two hours. There will be a relay every two hours."

"What about Loïc?" asked Craddle.

"He is not strong enough yet for any continuous work; but he will give you a helping hand as best he can. As to myself, I must go hunting; for our provisions are getting scanty, and a few quarters of game would do no harm to our ordinary."

"I am sure it would not," remarked Ribonneau. "I confess I am getting tired of smoked beef and ham."

"I'm thinking, faith, you are mighty weak yet, to go hunting, Don Pablo," suggested good-hearted Patsy Green.

"And when you are away, who will put down the quarrels?" asked Berthe, in a low tone.

Pablo felt the justness of her remark.

"Well," said he, "let Patsy and Vandeilles, who are the best shots, go and look for game in turns. To-morrow, being Sunday, will give them a good start."

"And who will see to the cooking?" inquired Craddle and Ribonneau, who seemed particularly interested in this question.

"Cypriana will. Loïc will cut wood for her, and help her generally, at the same time as he will look after the horses."

CHAPTER XX.

TALE-TELLING AND OTHER SUNDAY PASTIMES.

MUCH to the annoyance of Vandeilles and Ribonneau, both systematically opposed to anything that partook of a religious sentiment, it was agreed that Sunday should be a day of rest,—a practice Bras d'Acier was the more anxious to establish, as he knew its beneficial influence on the health of the miners.

Patsy Green, accordingly, shouldered his gun and started in search of game, followed by the two Frenchmen.

Wavering between his passion for hunting and his jealousy, Benito determined at last to remain at the bivouac. As to Domingo, laziness was far too preponderant in him to make it necessary for him to contend with any other feeling. He therefore eagerly embraced the opportunity of its being Sunday, to sleep on the grass and smoke cigarettes in the intervals.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, however, Craddle having temporarily returned from fishing, this toilless occupation tempted the vacquero, and, with Cypriana by his side, he shuffled his way along with the Yankee when the latter went back to the stream.

Pablo paid so little attention to Rosina that Benito soon made up his mind to follow them, though with the firm intention of coming back from time to time to see what was going on. They were fishing not more than fifty yards away ; he could therefore easily satisfy his curiosity.

There then remained but four members of our party on the plateau : Berthe, Rosina, Bras d'Acier and Loïc Kermainguy.

The latter, always absent-minded and away in cloudland, had stuck his pick-ax in his left foot and had thus disabled himself for a few days.

"Come," said Berthe to him, "you have so often said you would tell me your history ; you ought to fulfill your promise to-day."

He blushed, as usual, and shook his head.

"Why not ?"

"I have no history."

"Well, you might tell us what brought you to California."

"That would not interest you much," answered Loïc, more and more embarrassed. "You would only laugh at me, as they all did on board ship."

"You are unkind, Loïc," said Madame Vandeilles, sharply. "I never laugh at anybody ; you know I don't ; and I am not going to begin by one to whom I owe my very life."

"Surely, you are not afraid of me, either," remarked Pablo, in his gentle, earnest way.

"Oh, no !" replied Loïc, who, in truth, felt the greatest veneration for the creole, and knew he was held in affection by him. "You are so kind to me, Don Pablo, that I am sure I don't know how to show you my gratitude."

"You owe me no gratitude, my friend. It is I who am indebted—we all are indebted to you, on the contrary, for saving Madame Vandeilles. And you may make your mind easy, Loïc ; since it is a fortune you have come here for, I will undertake to get you one."

"Ah, but you know, I want a big lump of money," murmured the little Breton.

"How much ?"

"Seventy thousand francs."

"If I put you in the way of getting sixty thousand ?"

"That would not be enough, Don Pablo," replied Kermainguy, with determination.

"And if I placed eighty thousand in your reach?"

"I only want seventy."

"Never mind, you are very ambitious all the same."

"Oh, it is not for myself."

"For whom?"

Loïc hung down his head and made no reply.

"Oh, I know," suggested Rosina, with an arch smile.

"It's for some young lass in Europe!"

"How can you suppose that?" he said, quite sorrowfully.

"And, besides, there is no harm in what I have done, and I don't mind telling you, if you would like me to; only you must promise me not to laugh at me. You know, I am no good at talking; and if I see you making fun of me, I shan't be able to get on."

Rosina reassured him.

"Well, you must know," he began, "my father and mother died when I was quite a baby, and my grandfather took me to his house with my brother and my sister. My grandfather, you see, whose name is Ivon Kermainguy, had served for a very long time at the château of the Marquis of Tregastel-Kerlo, near Douarnenez. When he reached to three-score years, the marquis gave him a bit of land and a little house, and there the old man lived with his wife. My father, too, had been wood-keeper for the marquis; and all the time he was sick, Madame de Tregastel had sent him soup and beef every day, and drugs, too, which cost a deal of money, people said; and she used to give them for nothing to all the poor folks about the country. But before God's will there is no resisting. All the physicians and all the drugs in the world can do nothing for a man when his hour has come; and so my poor father died.

"The marquis himself came to the burial. He held one of the corners of the pall, as my grandfather often told me. You may guess how we all loved him. In our family there was not one that would not have laid down his life for him.

"My brother Jobic was a fine, big, strong fellow; he worked in the fields with the grandfather; my sister helped the old woman in the house; as for me, they said I was only half a boy, and for a long time they thought I'd never get

to my full growth. I had a simpleton look on me, as you would say. And then I was so lazy : I would much rather read stories by the fireside, or run about the fields or the seashore, than dig or weed. And that would put the grandfather in a passion ! Of course he was right, poor grandfather was ; when people are poor, they must earn their bread.

"The minstrel of the village had taken a fancy for me, as he saw me following him wherever I could and listening to him with all my ears. He taught me how to play on the biniou and the bombard, and he used to say I should be a great musician some day. It is he, too, that showed me how to make verses in Breton, and in French even, but poor old Dommenec !—I don't think he was very good at French poetry, himself.

"However, all that was not the thing for Ivon Coz.* One day that he had told me to mind the cows, and I had let them run about in a corn field, he flew into a regular fit ; he caught hold of a stick and began to punish me. I was in the wrong and put up with the beating without a cry or a struggle, when the marquis happened to pass that way.

"Well, well, Ivon !" he said to the grandfather, "what are you beating that child for ?"

"He is a good-for-nothing brat !" said the old man. "He won't earn the bread he eats. He spends all his time scribbling on bits of paper, or splitting my head with his cursed biniou."

"The marquis, who was kindness itself, asked me some questions. I told him everything. I said my grandfather was in his right in punishing me, but that I could not help myself ; as soon as I saw a book or a biniou, everything else got out of my head. The marquis then went on chatting with me for some time ; he asked to see my verses and then took them away with him.

"Next day the Abbé Lemarec, the chaplain at the château, came and said the marquis had sent him for me. Although my grandfather was sometimes harsh with me, I was unwilling to leave him, at first, but the good man did not understand that any one could disobey the will of a marquis, and so I had to go. Mr. Lemarec rigged me up with

* Old Ivon.

new clothes from head to foot and brought me up to the château. At that time I could read and write, or the next thing to it. The schoolmaster had taught me a few sums, too; but I did not bite at arithmetic much.

"I fancy I still see the big drawing-room that the Abbé Lemarec brought me into.

"The marquis was reading in one corner; the marchioness was making clothes for the poor people; she spent her life at that.

"Mr. de Tregastel tapped me on my cheeks, and called me his big cherub. He said I should act as secretary to the marchioness and the chaplain, and that I should go and visit the sick and the poor in their name.

"You may well imagine I had not much to do at the château. Mr. Lemarec, seeing I knew so little, began to give me lessons, and kept on asking me what I intended to do with myself; I did not know; so, how could I have told him? At last he asked me if I did not feel a vocation for the priesthood—which is a great honor for a poor peasant in our country. I answered him I was too poor for that.

"‘Pshaw!’ said he, ‘God will provide for it.’

"And the next morning he told me the marquis would pay all the expenses if I made up my mind, later on, to go to the Séminaire.* From that day he gave me lessons in Greek, for which I had no great taste; and in Latin, which I liked much better. He was pretty well pleased with me; but what big sighs he would heave every time he saw me writing verses or playing the biniou! So long as it was on religious subjects he did not say too much, but when he came across the word ‘love’ in my little poems, he would begin to fidget and turn the back of his cap to the front of his head, and in the end would pitch them into the fire."

"Had you no comrades?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"No, Don Pablo. I did feel sometimes as though my heart would burst, if I did not scribble poetry or play some tune. What I am going to say will make you laugh, perhaps: but when I sang my verses or drew some sounds out of my poor biniou, it was the same as if I poured my soul out into the heart of a friend. Had I no comrades? No. I would readily have rushed to death for the sake of the

* Ecclesiastical College.

marquis, or his son, or the Abbé Lemarec ; but they were too far above me for me to look upon them as friends."

"Poor fellow!" murmured Berthe.

"Well, for some time past, Mr. de Tregastel and the marchioness had become quite sad-looking. I often saw tears in the lady's eyes ; and I noticed this every time she heard from her son, Count Maurice, who was always in Paris, or away traveling. From what I heard all about me I soon made out that the count was the cause of great grief to his parents. It appears that he had fallen in love with an actress, and he used to spend a deal of money with 'that creature,' as Mr. Lemarec would call her. One day the old marquis sent for me to his study. He asked me if it was still my intention to become a priest. I said it was, and yet,—I can't tell you why,—I felt choking, as I said the words.

"Take care, my child,' said he to me. 'Think well before you act.'

"I can see him still, the grand old nobleman, sitting in his big arm-chair, with his long gray locks and his handsome face so calm and imposing.

"Take care,' he repeated. 'If you do not feel the necessary vocation, it is better for you not to take holy orders. All of us here are fond of you and we should like to see you happy. It is time yet ; you still may choose another career. Although my fortune is no longer what it was, owing to circumstances I need not enter into, I mean to start you well in life.'

"Monsieur le marquis,' I answered, quite confused, 'what makes you think I no longer wish to be a priest?'

"Your melancholy, my lad ; and those pieces of poetry that you are continually writing, and in which the word *love* recurs so often. Come, tell me, has any young girl made an impression on you? You are very young to get married yet ; still, we should see to arrange matters for the future.'

"I had great difficulty in convincing the marquis that I was not in love.

"Then, where do you go and find out all you write?'

"I explained it to him as best I could ; told him how I had never seen the girls or the boys that I mentioned in my poems unless in my own head ; and that, in a sort of way, I was like the artist I had seen at the château, drawing and

painting beautiful heads that resembled no one alive, and that he took out of his own imagination.

"Just a few days before, the Abbé Lemarec had suddenly dropped on me, as I sat by myself on the sea-shore, crying bitterly. On his asking me what was the matter, I had blubbered out that poor Jeannie had just drowned herself; and as I saw the good man thinking of rushing for help, I had to tell him straightway that Jeannie was a girl I had invented myself. Then he had walked away very angry, but apparently had said nothing about it at the château, for the old marquis continued:

"Well, then, it is just what the marchioness said. Your mind runs too fast, my poor lad. God grant it may not make you unhappy! Meanwhile, tell me, do you intend entering the Church or do you not? If your mind is quite made up to do so, I shall send you to the Séminaire and pay for you; but remember, you must say good-by forever to your poems and your biniau. Now, say yes or no.'

"Mr. de Tregastel's last words had so affected me that I was unable to answer him. I felt just as if, by consenting to that sacrifice—and I understood how necessary it was—I was burying myself alive. I got ashamed of myself, and tears began to roll down my cheeks.

"Don't fret,' the marquis said to me, 'don't fret, my poor child, I have adopted you before God and I will not fail to do my duty. We shall find you some employment more congenial to your nature, and you shall stay with us.'

"I threw myself at his feet and thanked him. My heart was so full, I wished I could get myself killed for him to show him my gratitude and devotion. We Bretons, you see, we hate people thoroughly when we hate them, but we love just the same way. Let it be good or evil, we never forget what is done to us. Just then the marchioness came into the room. She looked heart-broken, and her eyes were swollen. I betook myself away with a heavy weight on my chest. I felt, somehow, there was some terrible misfortune coming down on the noble house. A few days later, I heard the whole truth. Count Maurice had set his foot into an accursed place called the Bourse. I never exactly knew what it was, but it seems many and many a man has ruined himself there. The count had lost over 400,000 francs in that place, and was unable to pay them. His father was off to

Paris immediately. From what I was told by the law-people who came for the sale afterward, it would appear that the marquis was not in the least obliged to pay these 400,000 francs, but the old gentleman put his fair name above all other considerations, and he ordered all he possessed to be sold. The farms were auctioned off. As to the château, it was bought, by private contract, by Mr. Boninet, a merchant in St. Malo ; and it only fetched 60,000 francs, because there was a restriction in the deed, to the effect that, at any time within three years, the marquis could re-enter into possession by paying back the 60,000 francs, with interest, to Mr. Boninet."

"And can it be to get that money, that you have come to California?" asked Rosina, astonished at the singularity of this story, devoid of incidents and without a single word of love.

"It is, señora."

"And how did the idea get into your head?" inquired Pablo.

"Well, you may guess how the ruin of those good people, to whom I was so greatly indebted, grieved me more than anybody else. Sometimes I would say to myself that I, myself, had drawn the calamity on my benefactors. Had not the terrible news come at the very moment when I had just declined to devote myself to the service of God? This thought tormented me day and night. I would try, and try, for hours together, to find out some means of coming to their help, but it was all in vain.

"And still I felt sure my poor master would die, if they had to abandon altogether the château, where their family had resided for two or three hundred years.

"*'My God,'* I would say, *'you who have performed so many miracles, do suggest to me how I may save my benefactors or at least preserve their old homestead for them ! If you hear my prayer, I swear to devote my life to you and make myself a priest, a monk, or a missionary, as our bishop will direct me.'*

"One day, I had barely finished this prayer once again, when a letter came from Count Maurice ; and at the same time the idea took possession of me that God had heard me and was sending me a message. The ruined count wrote from London and said he was off to California in the hope

of realizing a fortune at the mines. He gave a good many details about the placers ; he even sent several English newspapers with long articles on the subject. The Abbé Lemarec, who knew English and Italian, translated the papers for the marquis and his wife, and I listened with all my ears.

"There was no doubt about it : it was God that was speaking to me through the voice of the abbé. Away I should start at once. Unfortunately there was money needed ; and twenty crowns was all I had in my purse. However, I left the château one evening without saying a word to anybody, and I set out for St. Malo. There I was told I should go to Nantes, if I wanted a ship bound for California ; so I came back to Tregastel.

"There was a little coasting vessel at Douarnenez, which was to sail for Nantes about the end of the week. I had a long talk with the captain, and it was agreed I should work for my passage as a sailor and give him five crowns besides.

"It grieved me terribly, I can tell you, to leave the old village and the old people ; and my nights were sleepless nights. Well, at last the captain sent me word he was going to set sail, and I went off without saying good-by to any one. They would have laughed at me, you see, and they would not have let me go. Nobody could hear, as I did, the voice that kept on saying to me, 'Go, follow the inspiration that God has sent you.'

"I wrote to everybody,—to the marquis, to the marchioness, to the Abbé Lemarec, to my grandfather and the old woman, to my brother and my sister. I gave the letters to an inn-keeper at Douarnenez, and he promised he would not have them brought to the château till I was gone.

"When we got to Nantes the captain, a good-hearted man, although he swore like a heathen the whole of the blessed day, brought me to an acquaintance of his, a transatlantic captain. He was not going out at all for a long time, but he had a brother in command of a three-master just on the point of sailing for San Francisco. This other man came from our part of the country, too ; and when he saw me with my biniou under my arm, he gave me a slap on the shoulder and engaged me on the spot. With him, too, I was to work for my passage, and that was a great favor for Captain Gourio to grant me, for I was not strong enough

for a sailor, and I had never been out except on fishing smacks ; but, as I told you, Mr. Gourio was a *countryman*, and, besides, as he had several Bretons aboard, he said my biniau would cheer them up in difficult moments more than a ration of wine.

"Once on board ship, I did my best to earn my bread. At the first start the sailors were rather rough on me because I was not smart enough, and I would often sprawl at full length on the deck ; but by degrees I got stronger and more handy, and then Jann Toulhéry and Fanche Lekaër, two lads from St. Pol, who were very fond of hearing me play, always took my part. Anyway, by the end of the voyage they were all so friendly with me that every man of the crew made me a little present when I came ashore.

"When I had landed at Nantes, I had been greatly amazed and bewildered at the sight of the big town ; but it was far worse when I found myself in San Francisco. I often wondered to myself whether I was quite awake or not. The first nights I was there I slept in the open air ; for the lodgings were much too dear for my purse. After that I once saw a lonely woman attacked by a lot of drunkards, and I fought right and left for the poor thing, of course ; and when the husband came home, a little while after, he made me stop in their tent with them. It happened that he had not long been back from the mines himself, and he told me the different things I should get before starting ; but with the fourteen crowns I still had,—counting those that the countrymen had slipped into my pocket when I left them,—I could not dream of buying all that. So I simply asked him to tell me the way I should have to go, and I came away, trusting to Providence ; and you see I had good cause to do so, since I am here now. God knows very well it is not for myself I want gold, and I do trust He will not abandon me."

"You are a brave fellow, Loïc," said Pablo, stretching his hand to the little Breton ; "should Heaven grant us to be successful, I shall see to the fulfillment of your noble task."

Berthe, on her part, was not slow to tell him how deeply interested she had felt in his narrative. Rosina was still under the impression of her disappointment at the prosiness of the story.

"Was it on board ship you composed the verses you were singing when you appeared, so opportunely for me, on the waters of the Bird's River?" asked Berthe.

"It was, madame."

"Oh, what was it like?" exclaimed Rosina.

Like all Spanish women, she doted on music, and, seizing her mandoline, she insisted on Loïc favoring the company with the song and letting her accompany him. Accustomed as he was to sing without any accompaniment, the latter felt, for a while, more embarrassed than ever; still, as he had a good ear for music, he soon fell in with the mandoline, and both singer and player were thoroughly engrossed in their performance, when, suddenly, Pablo bounded to his feet and leveled his carbine.

"*Caspita!* don't fire! It's me!" cried Benito, as he crept out of the thicket, frightened, as all those of his race are, at the sight of firearms, however brave they may be, otherwise.

"What were you doing there in the underwood?" asked Bras d'Acier.

Benito concocted a whole history to account for his presence; but he might have spared himself the trouble so far as deceiving his listeners was concerned.

Pablo resumed his seat without wasting one word of comment on his untruthful explanations, and Rosina, with a shrug of her shoulders, turned back to Kermainguy as though intending to continue their duet.

Luckily for the *capataz*, who, for once, felt ill at ease despite his uncommon impudence, the fishing party reappeared just at that moment and were soon followed by the huntsmen.

Although the latter had taken their horses with them, the three men were now returning on foot. Fatigue and disappointment were visible in their countenances. Their tale was soon told. The three horses had been left in charge of Ribonneau, while Vandeilles and O'Loughlin ran after a wounded deer; Ribonneau had fallen asleep; and the horses had been stolen.

"And you saw nothing, Ribonneau?" said Bras d'Acier.

"Nothing at all, Don Pablo."

"And you did not follow the track?"

"I beg your pardon," said Vandeilles; "but when we

came to the foot of the hill, we positively lost every vestige of it. For more than two hours, we remained in that particular spot, not the slightest trace could we find."

"They'll have gone up the hill," suggested Craddle.

"Right there the sierra rises up like a very wall, and I will lay you anything that no horse or mule, or goat even, could climb up the rock we had before us. Why, an ape could not do it!"

"It is too dark now to go in search of them," said Pablo. "Let us wait till morning. Meanwhile let us keep a good watch to-night."

Tired as he was after his day's hunting, good-natured Patsy Green helped Cypriana to get supper ready. Loïc followed him, and so did Madame Vandeilles. Rosina remained with the miners.

"What do you think of our thieves?" said Vandeilles to Pablo.

"They are likely to be Indians. If we were further to the north I should not be surprised, for in that direction there are numbers of so-called horse thieves, Indians who steal horses for their flesh?"

"Don't they attack men, too?"

"That is to say, that as the hacenderos, whose grazing lands they pillage, naturally show them no quarter, the Indians, of course, treat them in the same way. In any case I would much rather have to deal with a tribe of horse thieves than with Apaches."

"Do the Apaches come as far as this?" asked Craddle.

"Sometimes. There are tribes among them who travel very far for game or for plunder. God preserve us from meeting them, for their cruelty is frightful."

"Then," remarked Vandeilles, with a heavy laugh, "I vote we have supper by way of laying a good foundation for to-morrow."

Thanks to Craddle's fishing, the meal was sumptuous; and while doing justice to those delicious salmon trout of California, they made their arrangements for the following day.

It was agreed that Patsy Green, Craddle, and Ribonneau would remain at the encampment, both in order to protect it and to work at the gold-digging. Pablo would bring with him Benito and Domingo, the two best rastreadores of

the troop, and Vandeilles would accompany them to show them the spot where the horses had been stolen.

Then a pipe or two were indulged in, by the fireside, and preparations were at once made for the night. On the withdrawing of the two married couples to their respective cabins, the other miners spread out on the ground, some their zarape, others the hide of some wild animal, and threw themselves, fully dressed, on these primitive couches. Five minutes later all were sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DESPERATE "HEADER."

THE deepest obscurity still covered the valley when Bras d'Acier and his three companions started; and as the sun barely commenced to gild the crest of the mountain, they reached the spot where the horses were grazing the day before when they had disappeared so mysteriously.

Pablo selected a clearing close by as a rallying point. Starting from this common center, each miner was to explore a definite area and warn the others by means of a pre-concerted signal as soon as he would have made any important discovery.

This signal, a sharp whistle, was to be repeated by the rastreador next to him, and thus be sure to reach the farthest off; whereupon all of them were to hasten back to the clearing.

At the end of about an hour and a half Benito was heard to give the signal, and Pablo and Vandeilles repeated it almost simultaneously. Domingo, just as lazy on this occasion as on every other, had kept much behind the others, and, the thickness of the wood preventing his hearing the whistle, he only made his way back to the clearing when the long silence suggested the idea to him that there should be something wrong.

Benito then led his friends to the spot where he had begun to discover a track. Between this and the place where the horses had been grazing there was an impassable thicket, preceded by a small eminence. The dry, stony soil of this mound rendered all search positively useless.

"We have only one thing to do," said Benito ; "let us go on in a straight line with the track we have just left."

A few marks thus obtained, and followed up with wonderful patience and sagacity, led them to the foot of the mountain. There, the soil becoming rocky again, they once more lost all possible vestige of a footprint.

"Let us just have a look at these rocks," remarked Pablo. "I have often observed that this kind of soil is likely to cover excavations."

Evidently, Benito was in luck that day. A quarter of an hour had not elapsed before he called to Bras d'Acier.

"Just look here !" he exclaimed, showing him a narrow opening, cleverly concealed with stones and foliage.

"The horses never could go through there," he answered, "unless they were killed and quartered first."

"Say, Bras d'Acier," called Domingo, the next moment, "here's a place where the horses struggled, and scratched the rock with their shoes."

"And it looks as if the sand was damp," added Pablo. "Now, as the wind comes from the opposite direction, no sand can have been blown here."

"My opinion is this block has been washed," said Vandeilles, as he rubbed off, with his handkerchief, some sand that was sticking to the rock, "and this sand has been thrown against it by the hand of man."

"And here are blood stains," whispered Domingo.

Other circumstantial evidence of this kind soon left no doubt in the minds of the rastreadores but their horses had perished in this spot.

"The only thing is to take a header down that hole," said Vandeilles, whose bravery, it must be said, knew no more bounds than did his many vices. "Down I go !"

Benito and Domingo exchanged a look.

Had any other man been in question, Pablo would probably have made no objection to his undertaking this dangerous but necessary errand. In this case, however, the volunteer was Berthe's husband, and Bras d'Acier felt staggered by the terrible responsibility he was about to assume toward her.

He therefore did his utmost to dissuade the Frenchman, but it was useless. Vainly did he object to him that he was not sufficiently acquainted with the tricks of the Indians ;

that he was neither so nimble nor so sharp-sighted as Benito or Domingo ; Vandeilles insisted. True, Benito had such a way of offering his services, that this alone would have been enough to make Vandeilles decline them, even though he had felt inclined to lend an ear to Pablo's arguments.

"If Vandeilles is afraid to expose his precious self, of course, I am quite ready to go," the *capataz* kept on repeating, with slight variations but with uniform sarcasm.

"Go to the devil, will you ? you half-washed nigger !" at last exclaimed Vandeilles. "When there is danger ahead, I never ask for a substitute."

"Well, then, let me go first," said Pablo.

"I'll not allow it," answered Vandeilles. "If anything happened you, what would become of our expedition ?"

The feeling was not very lofty ; but what could have been expected from the selfish wretch ?

"Who would keep order in the camp ?" asked Benito. "Bear in mind, we have got three women with us and over sixty thousand dollars in gold. Why, you would not be five minutes gone before we should be at each other's throats !"

Bras d'Acier was aware of all that, and while he was pondering over the various aspects of the case, Vandeilles resolutely took the "header" he had spoken of toward the opening ; nor was the expression very far fetched, for he had to crawl head foremost between the rocks like a veritable snake.

Just as he was about to disappear, Pablo placed in his hand the end of Domingo's lasso.

"Listen," he said to him ; "as soon as you are in danger, give a jerk to this cord ; I shall get Domingo to hold it all the time."

"All right," answered Vandeilles, whose feet alone could now be seen ; "but—say, I would rather you hold the lasso in your own hand, Don Pablo."

"So I will ; but, for mercy, I entreat you, stop short the moment you see any danger in front of you."

Five minutes elapsed,—five hours for Bras d'Acier. The cord, which he gradually paid out, still kept on the stretch. Suddenly he felt it getting slack ; he gave it a gentle pull ; it gave way.

"Could it be he is coming back ?" said Pablo to himself.

He gave a strong pull. The lasso offered no resistance ; he then drew it all out ; the leather had been cut, and, judging by the short length that was missing, it had been cut quite close to Vandeilles's hand.

As they were examining it, four gunshots were heard, away in the direction of the encampment. One of them was particularly loud.

"There is a fight up on the plateau !" exclaimed Benito. "This last shot came out of Craddle's rifle, I'd bet my head on it !"

"Let us run up there !" said Domingo.

"Surely, we cannot abandon Vandeilles in that hole !" said Bras d'Acier, with anguish.

"And while I am here, perhaps they are slaughtering my wife and my child," replied Benito. "Come away, Bras d'Acier, do come !"

"Think of the way the Indians torture their prisoners, will you ?" added Domingo.

Pablo thought of it but too much, and the image of Berthe in the hands of the savages made a cold sweat run down his temples.

"We cannot abandon Vandeilles," he murmured again.

And so saying he drew near to the opening and began calling Vandeilles as loud as he could. No reply was made.

He continued to listen ; not the faintest sound could be discerned.

"Here is the firing beginning afresh," said Benito. "For the love of God, don't let those three poor women be hashed to pieces !"

"Good God ! Good God !" cried Pablo, tearing his chest with his crisped fingers.

Then, heedless of the entreaties of his two companions, he entered the narrow aperture in his turn. He had crept eight or ten paces in the most complete darkness, when he felt his two feet caught from behind.

"It's me, Don Pablo," said Domingo. "We can see smoke and a reddish glare rising above the encampment. They will have set fire to the huts. Come back, for heaven's sake, or else we shall go, Benito and me."

There was no wavering possible now.

Several times again Pablo called out for Vandeilles with an energy trebled by his anguish. The most complete

silence succeeded his desperate cries. He backed out of the dark hole.

"Domingo," he said to the vacquero, "you are going to stop here."

"*Caramba*, Don Pablo, for sure I am not! I want—"

"Hold your tongue, and do what I tell you. If you stir from this place before I come back, as sure as my name is Pablo, I blow your brains out. Watch the hole through which Mr. Vandeilles has disappeared, and should he come out, run to his help, as he might require."

The miners had for a long time been aware that any attempt at resisting the *gambusino's* will was futile. Although with a good deal of grumbling, Domingo therefore made up his mind to obey, and hastened to climb up a tree and hide himself in the foliage as well as he could.

As to Bras d'Acier and Benito, they were off in an instant in the direction of the encampment. Notwithstanding the agility of the *capataz*, he was soon outstripped by Pablo, whose frenzied speed was prodigious, and who presently disappeared from view altogether.

Let us leave them flying to the help of their friends, and let us see what had become of Vandeilles.

After crawling flat on the ground for a distance of some fifty or sixty feet, he felt a draught of fresh air strike his face; from this he naturally concluded he was drawing near to a wider opening, and he pushed onward.

Suddenly he was seized by the throat; before he had time to utter a single cry, the hide of a wolf was thrown over his head and fastened around his neck in such a way as to entirely stifle any sound he might force out of his throat. Then two men caught him by the head and feet and threw him in a corner against the rock.

At the end of a quarter of an hour he felt they were undoing the knots of the rope around his neck; it was time—he was stifling.

There had been such a rush of blood to his head that when they put him on his feet he staggered like a drunken man. They threw water on his face, and by degrees he recovered.

He was in a pretty large cavern, overhung with stalactites. Near him stood three Indians, armed with macanas

or tomahawks, and looking at him in a threatening manner. He tried to walk ; his legs had been fastened together. He stooped to take off his fetters, but immediately one of the savages raised his macana over his head, to make him understand the consequence of any such attempt on his part.

Whereupon they gagged him securely and once more laid him in a corner.

Eight or ten paces away from him the Indians were having an animated conversation. One of them, whom Vandeuilles had not seen until now, seemed to be making a report to the others, and from his frantic gestures the Frenchman fancied the news he brought them should be of an important character. This man now left the grotto with four other Indians, two remaining with the prisoner, whose bonds were carefully examined anew.

Patience had never been the predominant feature in Vandeuilles's temperament ; and just now he was choking with powerless rage. Moreover, the cords with which he was bound, and the gag in his mouth, caused him intense pain ; and it was with great difficulty he could even change his position.

After a full hour's struggling he succeeded in loosening his gag to a slight extent ; then, by dint of stretching his legs and stiffening his arms, he somewhat slackened his bonds. Meanwhile, his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and it now seemed to him as though something glistened on the ground a short distance from him. He had to strive for at least half an hour before he could drag himself as far as the mysterious object. He felt for it with his chained hands ; to his inexpressible joy it was a knife. Slowly, noiselessly he moved the cords which were tied around his wrists on to the edge of the blade and tried to work up and down so as to saw them.

He had scarce commenced when two Indians leaped into the den. They seemed out of breath from running, and uttered cries of rage and despair. They were at once joined by the others and began an excited narrative, which was frequently interrupted by the howls and lamentations of a dozen squaws, who had come forward from the inmost recess of the cavern.

When the two new-comers ceased talking, there was an

outburst of yells and shrieks. Then two of the savages raised their voices as though to make a proposal which was, to all appearances, approved with enthusiasm.

Although he did not know a single word of their language, Vandeilles guessed that the Indians were proposing some deeds of vengeance on foes that had been captured. At the risk of cutting his hands, he now leaned with all his might on the blade of the knife; at last, his wrists were freed. At that moment, the squaws made a rush for him. One of them, a hideous-faced old hag, caught him by the hair with a cry of triumph, to drag him to the center of the grotto: a terrific blow from Vandeilles's clenched fist knocked her backward to the ground.

The Indians rushed to her help.

Vandeilles availed himself of this juncture to cut the leather strap with which his legs were still fastened, and darted for the opening. In an instant his captors were after him with uplifted macanas. Luckily for him, the foremost among them fell over a woman, and thereby caused the fall of several others behind him.

And now he had thrown himself on the ground to crawl into the opening, when his head almost knocked against that of an Indian coming toward him. By an almost instinctive movement he raised his arm and struck at the newcomer with his knife. The Indian, who was in the act of rising to his feet, received the stab full in the chest and fell by the side of him, howling with pain.

CHAPTER XXII.

“ONLY HORSE THIEVES!”

SHOULD any observer of human nature wish to see, for himself, how much fatigue it can endure and how much labor it can yield, he need only spend a few days in the Californian placers. There he will see gold-thirsty man, devoting to his task all the energy that nature can possibly have placed at his disposal, and temporarily suspending his work only when he has exhausted to the last vestige of his powers of endurance.

No wonder was it then, if, on this Monday morning,

Craddle, O'Loughlin, Loïc, and Ribonneau were up and stirring with the sun. Up, too, was good Madame Vandeilles, busy preparing the cold meat, the biscuits, and the tea for breakfast.

"A darned good creature, that is!" said Craddle, as he watched the young woman bustling about the tent with that gentle, melancholy smile of hers. "I bet your tarnation Mexican women are snoring away still like two organ pipes—and look at *her*! There she is slavin' it for us, while she needn't do a thing the live-long day if she didn't want to!"

"Doña Rosina is very kind and very amiable, too," suggested Loïc, reddening to the tips of his ears.

"Oh, I never said she wasn't, my young cock!" replied Craddle, with a laugh: "but right here, in this sort of luxurious apartments and sumptuous life, you see, a good housekeeper would tip the scales against all comers. Why, the best-looking girl in Kentucky wouldn't be in it! As to all your Spanish and Mexican and Californian women—all very good to make love and twirl on the light fantastic toe, my boy, but not—"

Rosina's unexpected appearance on the open piazza, in front of the encampment, caused the outspoken Yankee to bite his lips, and he had instantaneously given a different turn to his remarks, when he was interrupted by a sudden outburst of unearthly shrieks.

A dozen Indians had sprung up on the plateau, within twenty paces of Rosina.

Before she had time to move one step, several arrows whizzed past her, one of which grazed her arm. The next moment, as, dazzled and frightened, she almost reeled to the ground, she felt herself caught between two vigorous arms and carried off to Berthe's tent. There, Loïc—for her rescuer was no other—had no sooner received from Madame Vandeilles the assurance that her little friend was more frightened than hurt, than he was off again to the other miners.

For the first time the little Breton found himself face to face with an open foe since he had joined Bras d'Acier's party. No one could have recognized in him the bashful Loïc Kermainguy, who had restored Madame Vandeilles to her sorrowing friends and had winced under the demonstrations of gratitude then lavished upon him, as he would have

shrunk from the sting of a sneer. Indeed, his immoderate fearlessness well-nigh proved fatal to him. After discharging his gun on the Indians, he leaped out of the cabin, heedless of the advice of Patsy Green and the others; and with a hatchet in his hand he rushed upon the Indians like a madman. In a trice he had brought down two of them; but the next moment, he was knocked to the ground himself with a blow of a macana on his head.

"The saints between that little devil and all harm!" cried Patsy, beside himself with anxiety. "If we don't give him a lift, boys, the devil a taste of a potato he'll ever— That's one for you, my beauty!—Faugh-a-ballah! Hurroo, boys!"

This disconnected speech would be none the worse for an explanation: the first interruption was due to a dead shot from Patsy's faithful rifle, which laid one of the savages low, just as he was kneeling to scalp Kermainguy; and the final shout was given out to the *boys*, with a genuine Tipperary ring, as he immediately after darted out on the Indians with Craddle and Ribonneau.

Although the assailants were in superior number, the bullets obliged them to retreat at first. Patsy caught his friend Loïc with his left arm, while with a sword slash from his right arm he split the head of an Indian who, wounded though he was, still clung desperately to little Kermainguy; whereupon he ran back toward the camp with his burden, Craddle and Ribonneau covering his retreat with their revolvers. A veritable shower of arrows came down on the door, just as they all got inside and closed it after them. Luckily for them, the savages being afraid to show themselves too much, through fear of the terrible revolvers, their shooting was proportionately erratic.

At first Loïc was believed to be dead. The blow he had received was so formidable that it had been heard by the women inside the cabin. But he was to prove once more the proverbial hardness of Armorican skulls. At the end of two or three minutes he rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. Then he stared about him as if endeavoring to collect his thoughts; just then a shot from Craddle's gun and the howls of the Indians outside seemed to completely refresh his memory; and with one bound he made for the door before the men of the little beleaguered party had even noticed him.

"May I break my neck if I let you go, you little de-

mon!" exclaimed Craddle, catching him round the body. "Come, are you gone crazy? Do you want to get these women butchered? Here you are, Patsy, here's a target for you," he added, pointing to an Indian who was coming toward the hut, hatchet in hand.

A few seconds of silence; crack went Patsy's rifle; the native reeled a few paces with frightful yells and then fell backward, a corpse.

"That makes up seven of them on the ground anyway," said Ribonneau. "Can you see how many there are still, Patsy?"

"Maybe fifteen or twenty."

"Why, the more you kill of that vermin, the more there seems to be."

"There's more of them hid in the bushes, I'll go bail!"

"Let us be on the lookout," said Craddle; "some of them might get it into their darned noddles to get at us round by the back; keep an eye on this side, you fellows; I shall go and make a hole through the fence on the mountain side."

"Hallo, whatever are they about now?" exclaimed the Irishman.

"Why? What do you see?"

"Why, they are all hooking it, every mother's son of them, one after the other. Five of the heathens is all I can see now."

"Might they have the brilliant idea to rid us of their presence?" suggested Ribonneau.

"Don't you bet your money on that crank, stranger," answered Craddle, with a shake of his head. "You wait for the next canter."

"Here they are coming back," said Patsy from his lookout. "They are bringing wood with them and laying it on the ground. And there's another lot of them, by jabers!"

"With wood?"

"Yes, every ugly devil of them brings a load up. And, may I never—there they are setting fire to it!"

"At that distance, it would not do us much harm," ventured Ribonneau.

"That's more than I'd kiss the book for," answered Patsy. "By the holy fiddlers, if Pablo was only with us!—Here, Craddle, have a squint at them yourself."

"Damn my eyes!" exclaimed the Yankee, after a moment, "I guess I can tell you what they mean to do. They want to raise a cloud of smoke all around us and attack our hut under cover of it. Why, even now you can't see one of them. How can we take aim? Come, friends, what's best to be done?"

"We must avail ourselves of the smoke to make a rush out and dash through the rascals," said Ribonneau.

"Go long!" replied Pat, with a withering sneer; "what about the ladies?"

"Listen," said Berthe, coming forward. "Suppose O'Loughlin widened a good bit the hole you made in the fence, toward the mountain—"

"We might get out that way," interrupted Ribonneau. "You are quite right, madame. What do you think of it, Craddle?"

"I reckon that's the only way we can sneak out. Come, Pat, give me a hand at this fence!"

In less than two minutes a hole had been made, sufficient for one person at a time. The three women passed out first.

"Stop! Stop!" whispered Craddle to them. "Here are the demons coming up to the cabin!"

"Holy Mary! What will become of us!" screamed Cypriana.

"Hold your row! will you?" said the Yankee, angrily. "You'll bring the whole gang round this way. Not a word above breath, and none of your useless blab, at all!"

And so saying, he leveled his gun at the Indian he had just distinguished in the cloud of smoke, and fired.

"Now is your turn, Patsy," he added almost immediately. "There, near the fire—I see two—three—A splendid shot, friend! You are *Ar*, that's flat!"

"Shall I load your guns?" asked Berthe, noticing that, with the exception of Loïc, the miners had two guns each?"

"Will you know how, my little lady?" said Craddle.

"It would not be the first time," simply answered Berthe, as she took his empty carbine.

Thanks to this help, six shots were now fired in rapid succession, and four Indians were brought to the ground. None the less, the assailants kept on advancing under cover of the smoke, and pushing the burning wood before them, with

long poles, as they drew nearer and nearer to the huts. As to the miners, having now retreated to the foot of the mountain, they could possibly go no further; a steep, smooth rock stood erect behind them and forbade them the faintest hope of escape.

As they gazed on the volumes of smoke rolling thicker and thicker around them, three shots were heard in the direction of the valley and were answered by the howls of the savages.

"By my soul, that's Pablo's shot!" shouted Patsy. "Sure, I'd know his skin on a bush any day!"

And sure enough, there was Bras d'Acier, skin and bones and all, leaping through the fire and the smoke, and on to where his companions had sought refuge.

"Nobody hurt?" he hastened to ask, as he cast an anxious look around him.

"Mere scratches," answered Craddle.

"Lie down against the ground, ladies," said Pablo to the three young women; "you will be less exposed to the arrows. As for us, come along, friends! We must not let one of those wretches run away; one of them would be enough to bring another band down on us. You, O'Loughlin, stay here!"

And speaking thus, he rushed out again with Ribonneau, Loïc, and Craddle.

Just then, Benito having arrived on the plateau, and firing upon the Indians from behind a rock on the opposite side, the latter took to flight and the miners to pursue them.

Foremost among them could be seen Loïc, who (as Patsy had affirmed) had "the devil in him" that day.

"What a little fiend!" said Ribonneau, trying to keep up with him, and incapable of holding his tongue, even at such a moment. "If that's his way of converting the heathens, I, for one, would rather not be christened by him!"

Out of the dozen Indians besieging the camp, on Pablo's return, seven had soon fallen under the machetes or the bowie-knives of the miners.

Another was struggling on the ground with Loïc, whose life was barely saved by the fortunate intervention of Pablo. Yet another, lying flat in the grass behind a small mound, was covered by Benito's rifle, and could not stir from the spot without exposing himself.

As to Ribonneau, he was uselessly pursuing a savage down the hill, and panting and excited as he was, he had wasted two shots on him.

"We must try and catch two or three prisoners," called out Pablo, as he hastily garroted Loïc's antagonist.

Whereupon, leaving Ribonneau to his chase, he darted away on the footsteps of the only other runaway.

The latter flew like a deer, but the creole had few equals in running powers; he visibly gained upon him, and presently both were lost to view.

"Say, Loïc," cried Craddle, "now that your fellow is neatly roped up, just help me to catch the vermin that's creeping behind that mound, will you? You've got a lasso? Well, step out, right ahead—There! now to your right—go on—now do you see him?"

Loïc answered nothing, but immediately butted forward. At the same moment, the Indian leaped up like a hare, started from his lair. Before he had gone three paces, a bullet struck him in the right leg and brought him down, and the next moment, he, too, was pinioned by Loïc and Craddle.

Nor was it long ere Bras d'Acier was seen returning with his prisoner securely fastened and walking before him.

On reaching his companions, he reckoned nine Indians lying dead about the plateau.

"I dealt with four others, a short distance away, down there," he said. "I wish you would go and see if they are really dead."

Ribonneau and Craddle hastened to obey, but at first they could only find three corpses. The fourth Indian had been merely wounded and had feigned to be dead until Bras d'Acier had disappeared, after which he had concealed himself behind a clump of cactuses. Unfortunately for him, Craddle ferreted him out, and charitably "put him out of pain so far as this planet was concerned."

Thirteen dead and three prisoners, such was the total of the Indian losses. And if to this were added the two savages who had escaped, the whole force of the attacking party might be put down at a score of men.

"There is no doubt of it, they are only horse thieves," said Pablo, with contempt. "They are no good but for thieving. Apaches would have shown very different pluck."

"Now, Bras d'Acier," inquired Craddle, "what shall we do with these three gents? In my opinion, they wouldn't cut too ugly a figure swinging from three of these here stout boughs."

"I vote they be hanged, head downward," said Benito, "so they may feel what it's like, a little longer."

"We must not kill them at all," answered Bras d'Acier. "We shall use them to find out Mr. Vandeilles, if he be alive still. And that must be done instantly. Quick, back to the camp for a fresh stock of cartridges!"

Berthe, Rosina and Cypriana came out to meet them. Behind them came Patsy with downcast eyes and frowning look, like a schoolboy deprived of a holiday. He could not get over his disappointment at having been away from the thick of the fight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END OF ONE AND THE FORESHADOW OF ANOTHER.

"WHAT has become of Mr. Vandeilles?" gasped Berthe, not seeing him among the returning party.

In winged words Pablo told her all that had taken place until the noise of the fighting and the sight of the flames on the plateau had compelled him to make all haste back.

The blood even now flowing from his left arm, despite his efforts to conceal it, was an eloquent witness that he had been as unsparing of his own self on this, as on every other occasion; and the anguish breathing in his every utterance would alone have conveyed to Berthe, if indeed she had needed any such assurance, all it had cost his heart to yield to what he had considered an unavoidable necessity.

"Come, friends, away with us!" he added, when he had finished his harrowing tale.

"Half a minute, Bras d'Acier," cried Craddle. "We fellows aren't steel, you know!"

The other miners joined in the Yankee's appeal. In truth, they were so exhausted that, had their own lives been at stake, they could not have started off again without taking a short rest and some little food.

"Well," sighed Pablo, utterly forgetful of his own wants,

"snatch up a piece of meat and a ration of rum ; meanwhile, I'll see to the cartridges."

O'Loughlin had anticipated his wishes and had prepared the little stock for each man. Craddle saw that the Irishman's forethought was going to curtail still more the little respite Pablo had so begrudgingly accorded to them.

"Just one minute, Bras d'Acier," said he, holding a chunk of cold meat in one hand and an enormous glass of brandy in the other.

"Not one second more !" replied the creole. "Stay if you like, I'm off by myself !"

"Who would you like to mount guard here ?"

"Loïc and Ribonneau, since they are wounded."

"My wound is nothing," answered the little Breton ; "I can fight all right."

"No matter, you must stop here. Keep close watch, and fire two shots one after the other, if you are attacked. Come away, friends, do come !"

Electrified by the energy of their chief, the miners followed him, accompanied by Madame Vandeilles. Rosina and Cypriana remained at the encampment.

Some twenty paces in front of the cavern, Domingo was perceived walking away from it.

He had not seen a soul, he said, since Pablo had left him.

"Still, the two Indians who have escaped us must have come back here," said Bras d'Acier, pensively.

"Let us question those three," suggested Craddle, pointing to the prisoners who had been brought along ; "there may be a second entrance."

"You'll not get a word out of them," replied Pablo.

"We'll put a little gunpowder between their fingers," retorted Craddle.

"Of course, we must use their own weapons with the ruffians," added Benito.

Pablo proceeded, in his own stern but more humane way, to induce the prisoners to betray the secret of the other entrance. It was all in vain ; they persisted in pretending they did not understand what he wanted.

"There is but one thing to do," he said. "We must make our way into the cavern and use our prisoners as so many shields to protect us."

And taking one of the Indians, he straightway beckoned to him to creep into the opening. The savage resisted, but Pablo pushed him on before him and forced him into the hole. He then crawled in after him, holding his revolver in one hand and one of the Indian's ankles in the other. He had, besides, drawn out his poniard, which he held between his teeth. O'Loughlin and Craddle followed him.

Presently Pablo's leader, attempting to rise on emerging out of the narrow passage, uttered a loud cry and fell backward with such violence that the creole had to draw back slightly to get out of his way.

This was the Indian that Vandeilles had met face to face when he had attempted to enter the outlet. At the same time the noise of several voices reached his ear, among which he thought he recognized Bras d'Acier's.

"Who goes there?" he called.

"A friend," answered Pablo.

"Hand me a revolver, quick!"

Pablo had it ready for him. It was not one second too soon; one of the Indians had caught hold of his right arm and was endeavoring to wrench his knife from him. Grasping the proffered weapon with his left hand, he placed it almost against his aggressor's temple, and laid him low with one shot.

The natives, bewildered at this unexpected apparition of fire-arms, took to flight.

Pablo and his friends, expecting Vandeilles to rush into the opening, called out to know if they should make way for him. No answer was made to their inquiry. The circumstances did not permit of more than a second's delay. The miners quickly came out of the passage. There was no sign of the Frenchman.

"He must have set out after them," said Pablo, "wherever they have gone."

And perceiving a glimmer of light at the other end of the grotto, he led his men to it. This proved to be another opening, leading to a second and a much larger cavern. Here they found Vandeilles retracing his steps quite alone and carefully wiping his knife.

"No use going after them now," he said, "they are away. The cavern, on this side, opens out on endless prairies,

There is no knowing where they may be by this time, galloping as they are."

"We can chase them up," cried Craddle.

"On foot we never could; and they have taken every one of their horses with them. Besides, this side of the mountain is straight as a wall and smooth as a looking-glass."

"They managed to get down, didn't they?"

"They did, with ladders made of creepers, and they took very good care to tear them up and pull them down after them. Just come and see."

And, bringing his companions to the edge of the precipitous rock, he showed the débris of the ladders lying on the ground some fifty feet at least below the opening of the cavern.

As to the Indians, they were beyond the reach of any available fire-arms.

While listening to Vandeilles, Pablo examined the cavern with care.

"Although I am anxious," he began "to return to the camp as quickly as possible—"

"And don't you think I am, too?" interrupted Benito, who thought it was an age since he had left Rosina out of his sight.

"We must make time," continued Pablo, "to conceal the entrance to this place before we go."

"What will be the use?"

"Who knows? It may be useful to us some day."

"Do you apprehend any new danger?" asked Craddle.

"At the mines you must always be apprehensive, and take your precautions against every possible danger."

Pablo's words, though perhaps unintentionally on his part, impressed the miners in a peculiarly forcible way; and, with sad forebodings, they made their way back to the outer opening.

Here Vandeilles was reminded that he possessed such a thing as a wife, by seeing poor Berthe awaiting, more dead than alive, the return of his rescuers. However, as the feeling he experienced did not amount to more than one of momentary surprise, it soon vanished away.

In compliance with Pablo's suggestion, stones and sand and branches were heaped up in front of the aperture; and so cleverly was the work accomplished that a chance way-

farer might have passed within ten paces of the cavern without suspecting its existence.

After which they hastened back to the plateau, Benito running on ahead of the others.

Half an hour later they were all sitting down to dinner together in the large cabin. As soon as they had satisfied their robust appetites, sharpened even more than usual by the toils of the day, each one brought out his tobacco.

With the exception of Berthe and Loïc, every member of the band smoked. Even Rosina and Cypriana indulged in numerous cigarettes.

The general conversation turning, as might have been expected, on the events of the day, Craddle proposed that they should pursue the Indians, a motion which found no support among his hearers.

"You bet they'll come back, and fetch others with them, that's settled!" he remarked. "And when they do, it's just possible they don't let us off as cheap as they did to-day."

"I am rather afraid of the return of the Apaches," said Pablo. "That it was their footprints I saw on our way here, I have not the smallest doubt. That is why I think we should do well to see about going back."

Against this there rose a general outcry.

What! Abandon such a placer! And just when they were reaping the fruit of all their labors!

"Seeing we are all here together, suppose we made up the account of each one!" exclaimed Vandeilles.

An involuntary gesture of Pablo's showed how inopportune he deemed it to bring thus forcibly before the eyes of his men the immense share reserved to Vandeilles; yet the latter's suggestion was so warmly supported by all that Bras d'Acier made no objection to it.

Craddle, who, with Madame Vandeilles, kept the accounts, commenced accordingly to read out the list of the quantities of gold already collected and registered by them each evening in two separate little books. Indeed he might have saved himself the trouble; for every man present, save Loïc, knew the result of the addition as well as he did himself.

The sum total amounted to 248 pounds of gold, say about \$64,500, half of which, according to the original agreement, was to be handed to Vandeilles.

The other half was to be distributed equally between Rib-

onneau, Craddle, Patsy Green, Benito, Domingo, and Kermainguy. There was, moreover, one share to be reserved for the heirs of José and Mundiaz. Seven portions had therefore to be made of this second half, leaving over \$4500 to each.

In any other circumstance, such a result would have been thought very satisfactory ; but Vandeilles's disproportionate share made the others look almost insignificant. Truth to tell, even he scarcely felt satisfied with his lot, so thoroughly possessed was he of the demon of greed, and athirst with that unquenchable desire that

Grows on what it feeds upon.

No voice was louder than his to protest against leaving so soon the Plateau del Desierto.

"Very well," said Bras d'Acier, when the storm had subsided, "since you all wish it, we shall stay a little longer."

But the words were spoken reluctantly ; so at least did Berthe believe. Could her heart have deceived her? No. For a certainty, there was danger ahead, and it was for her he trembled.

After thus settling the matter, he moved away, calling Craddle and O'Loughlin after him to give them special instructions concerning the night watch.

No sooner had he done so, than a quarrel broke out between Vandeilles and Benito, through a sneering remark of Ribonneau, who thought it witty to proclaim the announcement that Vandeilles intended to make a magnificent present to each of his associates.

"I know what I have to do," replied the latter, amid the jeers of the bystanders, "and I need the advice of nobody on the subject."

"I should have been surprised, and no mistake," exclaimed Benito, with bitter sarcasm. "I have noticed before now, that it was only with other people's money Vandeilles was generous!"

"If I am not generous with my gold, I am at least not sparing of my blood," retorted the Frenchman, sharply. "And I know certain full-mouthed talkers who did not raise their voice quite so loud this afternoon when there was question of entering the cavern!"

"Well, every man in his turn," answered Benito.

"It strikes me it does not often come to your turn to show pluck."

"*Demonio!* Say that again, if you dare!"

"Most assuredly. I stated, and I repeat, that when a plucky man is needed, none but a fool would look to see if Benito was there."

Benito was down on him, machete in hand, ere the last word had fallen from his lips. Having positively no weapon of defense, Vandeilles caught him round the body and succeeded, with the same movement, in making him drop his machete. Unfortunately for him, Domingo, who was sitting near them, stretched out his legs so as to trip them up. Then, spreading his arms as though to prevent their falling, he jerked them in such a way as to bring Vandeilles to the ground under the *capataz*, and at the same time slipped a knife into the latter's hand.

At the cries uttered by Berthe and Rosina, Bras d'Acier was back like a flash of lightning, and tearing Benito away from Vandeilles's body, he threw him headlong to the other end of the tent, while O'Loughlin with difficulty held back the Frenchman, who foamed with rage.

In an instant, Benito was on his feet again, vociferating all the curses that his rich Mexican vocabulary placed at his disposal.

The report of a shot fired by Craddle, out on the plateau, caused a sudden diversion from the exciting scene.

"Help!" called the Yankee, as he made a rush for the pine trees that covered the side of the mountain.

Pablo, Patsy, Benito and Loïc were on his footsteps in a trice; and five minutes later they returned, bearing the body of a man. He had been struck full in the chest by Craddle's bullet. His costume was not different from that generally used by miners; he must have been an Englishman or an American.

He was still breathing, but could not speak; and the moment after his reaching the camp, he expired without having uttered a single word.

"You were too hasty, perhaps, Craddle," said Bras d'Acier! "Who knows? This unfortunate man may have had no evil designs."

"If so, why did he hide? Besides, look! I guess they could not get up a better bushranger at the theater. Armed

to the teeth and not a single working tool. Too hasty, eh ! Well, I reckon, my only fear was that this gent would get in at the finish before me ! ”

One glance at the dead prisoner, and Pablo had altered his mind about him.

“ He must belong to some band,” said he. “ We must see into it at once.”

“ Oh, not to-night, surely ! ” exclaimed Craddle. “ It’s a lot too dark now, and, moreover, we are completely done up ! ”

“ Well, to-morrow as early as possible, then ! And to-night we must keep the strictest watch.”

“ I am afraid there may be a whole gang of salteadores in these parts,” continued the Yankee ; “ and it strikes me this young man of mine was a spy, sent on ahead to have a peep at this here show.”

“ That’s my opinion, too,” chimed in Benito.

“ And I have got an opinion,” added Vandeilles, “ that my friend Goliath may have hobnobbed with a lot of scamps of his own kin, and may be on our track again.”

His presentiment was but too largely shared by all, and his ruthless opening up of this new perspective only deepened the gloom that weighed over the encampment.

Arrangements were made to double the guard for the night, and Bras d’Acier declared he would stay up till morning.

“ Well he might,” said Patsy Green to himself in an inaudible whisper, “ for all the sleep he’d have, suppose he as much as laid down.”

The good-natured fellow’s remark was but too true.

Not to speak of the never-ceasing anguish that racked his heart and brain with regard to Berthe, each day added to the difficulty of Pablo’s task with his men, as they became daily more and more overpowered by the baneful influence of their surroundings. Thanks to his personal character, his physical powers, his skill, his coolness and dauntless bravery, he still swayed the impassioned creatures under his command ; yet the peculiar position in which he was placed by the preference shown to Vandeilles in this expedition imperiled to a certain extent his prestige and his authority ; the Frenchman’s haughtiness, too, his violence, and, above all his laziness, should necessarily injure the creole in the eyes of the miners. It required all his authority, as well as

the absolute need they had of him, to prevent the outbreak of a rebellion among them.

He had no illusion on the subject, and it was the contemplation of stern reality, alas, that filled up his sleepless hours.

The night wore on without the least incident. A heavy downpour of rain may have been the cause of it.

The three days that followed were equally undisturbed, and the work, suspended the day before this alarm, was pushed on vigorously.

Nothing had been left undone by Pablo in his endeavors to find out the identity of the unknown spy. He had at first tried to follow up his footsteps ; but beyond the trees where he had been shot, every trace he had left on the ground had been washed away by the torrents of rain. The *gambusino's* efforts were therefore reduced to chance guesses, and eventually proved fruitless.

PART IV.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOT TO BE CAUGHT NAPPING.

NINE days had now elapsed since Craddle had fired on his intruding visitor, "against time" as he had explained it. Pablo, who had an eye to the future, had taken Benito and Domingo on two or three excursions down to the valley in search of a herd of wild horses. At the diggings the miners had toiled with feverish activity, and in a very short time had collected an additional amount of almost twenty-eight pounds of gold.

This magnificent result was in a measure due to the use of gunpowder, which Bras d'Acier had permitted for the past four days; but a singular phenomenon now made it imperative to return to the old process. Although the explosive mine did not penetrate below the surface of the plateau, an extraordinary disturbance had been produced on the mountain side just where the two branches of the Sierra Zatecas joined and formed the elbow, in the angle of which the huts had been constructed.

Through some unknown cause, crevices had appeared between the rocks, and enormous pieces of quartz, emerging out of the loose sandy soil in which they had been buried, appeared as though suspended over the plateau. As a certain amount of space had been left vacant between the mountain and the cabins, the fall of these blocks was not a source of imminent danger for the safety of the party, yet it was one of fresh anxiety for Pablo. At the peril of his life he had managed to climb up to the spot where the greatest convulsion had taken place, and had ascertained the very little consistence of that soil, apparently so massive. The earthy crust which formed its outer covering was in reality a network of fissures. In many places even, that which at a dis-

tance looked a rock, proved but a compound of heterogeneous and ill-aggregated elements, and crumbled under the pressure of his fingers like a lump of dried-up clay. In this, he fancied, he found the explanation of the forming of the large cavern used by the Indian horse thieves in the other branch of the sierra.

On his return to camp, he found the miners engaged once more in weighing their treasures. The quantities lately gathered had raised Vandeilles's share to over \$40,000, and that of each of the others to well-nigh \$6,000. Dust and nuggets were placed in deer-skin bags, which were duly sealed with wax by Bras d'Acier, Vandeilles and Ribonneau, and then buried under the soil of the large tent.

"Now, my friends," said Pablo, when all was terminated, "now we must get ready to make a start for home next week."

"At the end of the week?" exclaimed Craddle.

"Right at the beginning," answered Pablo. "We have exhausted the plateau; now we could only work it with gunpowder; and the nature of the mountain renders that process positively dangerous. Moreover, I feel confident that our explosives will attract marauders, white men or Indians, if indeed they have not done so already. Not later than tomorrow we must begin to make ready, and on Monday morning we are off."

A chorus of recriminations was raised once more, the only voices wanting in which being those of Patsy Green, Loïc, and Domingo.

"Truly, you are insatiable!" said Bras d'Acier, with a feeling of pain and also of disgust which he was unable to conceal entirely.

"Well, so much fatigue and dangers for \$5600, straight, is a cheap lot, I'll warrant!" said Craddle.

"It is considerably better than death at the hands of the bushrangers or of the Apaches," replied Pablo. "Besides you do not forget that this is but the first expedition. You know I have promised another to those of you who joined this one for the benefit chiefly of Mr. Vandeilles. The Placer del Desierto is not the only one I am acquainted with. And with what you have already in hands, the produce of the second expedition will make up a very respectable sum for each of you."

"A capital of two hundred thousand francs hardly brings more, in France, than seven or eight thousand francs a year," remarked Vandeilles. "That sum would not be much of an income for Paris."

"Surely we might live in the country," said Berthe, indignant at her husband's selfish greed.

"Thank you, I would rather not!" retorted Vandeilles, with a sneer. "I would as soon keep up this kind of life some time longer, were I to encounter a few more dangers."

"If you were alone, sir, it would not matter much!" exclaimed little Loïc, to whose upright nature the Frenchman's behavior was evidently loathsome. "The life you speak of is all very well for a man, but it is too hard for a woman. Madame Vandeilles will break down under it, for sure, sooner or later."

"Now, let every man here listen to me," said Pablo, with even more than his habitual earnestness, "and weigh his words well before he answers me."

There was a deep silence. All eyes were turned toward him.

"The passion for gold," he continued, "is one of those that only increase the more, as you give way to them the more. The more nuggets you will dig up, the more you will want to get. Now you are going to fix for me a sum which shall be the utmost limit of your ambition in this case,—and mark me, I speak, of course, of a reasonable sum, not of any fabulous amount."

Another short spell of silence followed. Then all began to speak at the same time among themselves.

One asked for twenty thousand dollars, another a hundred thousand, a third fifty thousand, Benito and Domingo wished for "the full of their hats" of gold.

"Well?" inquired Pablo, after a while, "have you agreed on any one sum?"

They were far from it; and the hubbub was likely to come to no practical issue when Craddle proposed to settle the matter by vote.

The papers were put together in the medal-bespangled hat, whose maker in Brittany had doubtless never dreamt it would be used for such a purpose; Loïc was appointed

vote teller ; and the sum of \$80,000 having obtained the majority, it was by him duly announced to Bras d'Acier.

"Now, are you quite agreed about it?" asked the latter. "Do you promise me not to alter your minds in any way, and do you tell me on your oaths that you will come away as soon as ever you have realized that sum?"

"We do!" they all shouted, utterly stupefied at so unexpected a concession on his part.

"Very well. Then you may begin preparing for the journey this very evening."

"How is that?"

"By Monday, a few hours before sunrise, I shall have put you in the way of getting more than one hundred and twenty pounds of nuggets."

A hurrah of delight welcomed Pablo's words, concerning the realization of which not one of them entertained even the shadow of a doubt. Then numbers of questions poured upon him from every direction, but he declined to answer any.

"Monday," he said, "you will know everything. Meanwhile commence your preparations."

And it was done accordingly ; large bags were manufactured with bisons' skins wherein to place the little pouches of gold dust. Others were made, in anticipation, for the nuggets that the ever-trusty Pablo had just promised. Benito, Domingo, and Vandeilles busied themselves with the harnessing of the eight horses which the miners had kept in their possession all this time, though allowing them comparative freedom in the boundless prairies at the foot of the sierra. It was made the business of Craddle and O'Loughlin to see to the tents and such heavy articles as it would be necessary to bring away. As it was advisable to take as few encumbrances as possible, they agreed to abandon the cradles and some of the more bulky tools on the plateau. The three women, aided by Loïc and Ribonneau, packed up the smaller-sized objects and made the necessary repairs to the garments which the travelers might need on their journey.

As to Pablo, he went from one to the other, giving here a word of satisfaction, there a suggestion ; and who, better than he, could tell the requirements of placer life or forest tramping?

At last, about ten o'clock, he gave the signal for retiring.

In the midst of this scene of bustle and loud mirth, he was the picture of care and melancholy. "Sure a blind man would have seen there was something hanging over him," as Patsy Green put it.

Craddle, coming up to bid him good-night, could not refrain from asking him if he dreaded any new danger.

"Not more than any other night," he replied; "but, friend, I have seen so many proofs of the vanity of human hopes, that it is always when success seems nearest at hand that I dread some unforeseen catastrophe. In truth, I know not why, but to-night I am restless. I wish we were gone from this plateau, and yet— Who is on guard for the first hours?" he called, interrupting himself.

"I am," answered Ribonneau.

"And after you comes O'Loughlin?"

"Yes, Don Pablo. I am the boy after him," replied the Irishman.

A quarter of an hour later all were asleep inside the tents, save Bras d'Acier and Ribonneau. The former had stretched himself, fully dressed, on a bison's hide, but could not close his eyes. The latter paced up and down in front of the camp, struggling against the drowsiness which gradually gained upon him, despite all his efforts. In vain he now rubbed his eyes, now hurried his step or indulged in the wildest gymnastic exercises; down, down his eyelids weighed. Soon he was plunged into that kind of somnambulism which is frequently observed in navy officers on quarter-deck at night. He kept on walking up and walking down, but his eyes were quite shut, his brain was in a torpor; the legs of the automaton sentinel seemed alone to have escaped the influence of sleep.

Meanwhile, some fifty paces away from him, certain indistinct forms were slowly moving toward him in the dark. Now and then the mysterious objects stopped their progress and stood quite still. Then, as soon as Ribonneau's step sounded farthest away, they slowly, cautiously came a little nearer. Presently, they all kept motionless except the foremost among them. It was a man, and he was now creeping on ahead, on his hands and knees, with as much patience as skill.

When he had got quite close to the path so mechanically

trodden by Ribonneau, he laid literally flat behind a rocky protuberance, which could not be more than a foot high.

Then, just as the luckless somnambulist passed unconsciously by, he bounded on him like a tiger; with the left hand he caught him by the throat, while with his right he buried his knife in his chest. Poor Ribonneau, struck in the heart, scarcely uttered a stifled cry and fell dead, his murderer instantly rushing back to his companions.

Fortunately for the miners, the thud of Ribonneau's fall had not escaped Bras d'Acier's ear. He seized his rifle and cautiously went out of the cabin. After vainly trying to pierce through the intense darkness, he made his way to where he thought Ribonneau should be. Meanwhile, as there was no sound of footsteps, he foresaw some calamity. With infinite caution he crawled on and on. At last his hands came across a human body; he drew them back, they were full of blood. He stopped, laid his ear against the ground and held his breath. A faint rustle, imperceptible to any but one with his experience, came up to him. Back he crawled to the cabin, and noiselessly gave the alarm.

"They are white men," he whispered. "I caught the glitter of their gun-barrels. They are coming toward these huts. Now, let the women retire to the back, in the angle of the mountain, and lie down behind the ledge of rock that is there; Loïc will go and stay with them. But not a word, not a stir until I give the signal. You others, come with me softly—no shoes, no hats—flat against the ground—one gun in each hand, but on no account shoot till I order 'fire!'"

Implicit obedience followed these words, and one minute later the miners halted near the spot where their unfortunate companion was lying. In addition to the obscurity of the night, they were protected by the shadow of the huts. Without uttering a syllable, Pablo laid his hand on Vandeilles's shoulder and directed his attention to a little glimmer, barely perceptible, some thirty paces at most from where they lay. It must have come from the barrel of a gun or the blade of a naked sword.

Vandeilles went through the same dumb show with his neighbor, who repeated it to the man next to him and so on to the last of the party.

Pablo now laid his lips quite close to Vandeilles's ear :

"Yourself, Benito, and Domingo are going to fire at my first signal. Patsy, Craddle, and I will fire by the flash of our enemy's shot. You three, aim at the glittering spot I have just shown you. One knee to the ground as soon as you fire."

With wonderful skill the word was passed from man to man. Not a stir, not a sound made the air vibrate. One minute elapsed, which seemed an age. The shining object, which could be seen moving and stopping alternately, and about which other faint glimmers flashed now and again, was now within twenty feet of the miners.

"Fire!" thundered Pablo.

Three shots were fired by his men, and were immediately answered by eighteen detonations from the opposite side. But just then Pablo, Patsy Green, and Craddle covered their aggressors by the light of their own shots and fired.

The noise of hurrying steps now resounded on the rock, and human forms, whose number could not be ascertained in the darkness, sprang up within a few paces of the miners.

"Fire!" again called Pablo.

Five bullets rent the air simultaneously and shrieks of pain and rage followed the discharge. Some of the assailants fell back; others halted. Only two pushed forward still. Pablo, who had reserved his second shot, brought down the first of them. In the twinkling of an eye Vandeilles threw himself flat across the other's path and tripped him up. He had not, however, the satisfaction of carrying out his *ruse* to the end, for Pablo, at whose very feet the fellow was thrown in his fall, transpierced him through with his machete.

Utterly disconcerted by this reception, the assailants now fled in a body, while our party hastened to reload their rifles.

"I rather guess we are rid of these for to-night," remarked Craddle. "You bet, they hardly know who is who this minute."

"Quite so," said Vandeilles; "but to-morrow—"

"To-morrow ain't here yet, stranger."

"What shall we do now?" continued the Frenchman, addressing Bras d'Acier, who stood for a moment, thinking and watching.

"We should want some prisoners," was the answer. "Here, Domingo?"

"Yes, señor."

"Come along with me, your knife in one hand and your lasso in the other. We must catch some of the wounded men and fetch them here."

A minute or two went by. A stifled cry was heard, then the noise of a struggle.

Soon Pablo and the vacquero reappeared, dragging two prisoners after them. Domingo's was covered with blood and in such an exhausted condition that he must have given his captor but little trouble. The other had his throat squeezed in Pablo's iron fingers and was scarcely able to breathe. One was English, the other a Mexican.

"Don Pablo," whispered O'Loughlin, "the chap you poked through with your knife is breathing still."

"Very well; don't kill him. Stop here Patsy, with Domingo and Craddle, and warn me at the least noise. Loïc, run to the big cabin and fetch me the eight pounds of gold that were over when we made up the ten-pound bags last night."

Loïc was back in an instant. Bras d'Acier took his prisoner a few paces away, out of hearing of the others, and somewhat loosened the vise around the poor devil's neck, but at the same time letting him feel the point of his navaja against the skin of his chest.

"The first cry you utter you are a dead man," he began, by way of a prelude. "Now listen; you see this pouch; there are eight pounds of nuggets in it. If you tell me the truth I will give it to you; if you lie, my knife will go into you instantly." And knowing the effect it would have on the prisoner, he added, "I am the man they call Bras d'Acier. Now, will you speak true?"

The poor wretch gasped "yes" as best he could. Whereupon his neck was entirely released.

"Bear in mind, I have two other prisoners. If you tell me a lie, I shall know it directly. How many are you in your band?"

"Twenty-three."

"I did not hear so many shots as that."

"Six of us will not be here before to-morrow."

"How is that?"

"They were sent out to follow traces that we found, round to the right of the mountain."

"Just nine days ago we killed a man who was roaming about our camp ; was he one of you ?"

"A stout, dark fellow ?"

"Yes, with a bushy beard, blue eyes, a scar on his left temple, and a piece of his upper lip cut off."

"That was John Poker, from Massachusetts. He had been sent ahead to scout."

"What did you think when he did not go back ?"

"That he had been done for by some grizzly or maybe by you."

"Who has brought you here ?"

"Goliath."

"So you were coming purposely to rob us and murder us ?—Come, out with it !"

"Ye-e-e-s, señor."

"How is your band made up ?"

"All sorts : English, Americans—there's one French fellow, and there's nine salteadores of Manuelito's gang."

"Who is your chief at present ?"

"Manuelito is ; but, the fact is, Goliath has got more authority than he has ; and now he'll be minded more than ever, for he said it was all rubbish thinking we should catch you napping. It was Manuelito that forced us to come to-night."

"What was Goliath's plan ?"

"First he wanted us to wait till we had our six men back, and then he would not have us attack your camp till some day when we'd be sure that Bras d'Acier was away hunting."

"Do you think we shall be attacked again to-night ?"

"I am almost sure you won't."

"How many of you have we disabled, do you think ?"

"I should say five or six ; maybe more."

"Now, is all this true ? I am going to ask the same questions from your companions. Don't forget what I told you would be the consequence."

"True, every word, señor."

"I shall soon know. Here Craddle, keep your eye on this man ! If he keeps quiet, leave him alone ; if he stirs, kill him on the spot."

So saying, he went over to Domingo's prisoner, who was barely conscious and whose life was fast ebbing away through

a frightful wound. A few words were all that could be drawn out of him ere he breathed his last sigh ; still he had said enough to prove the veracity of the first captive, Dick Burnell.

Unfortunately for the latter, he let himself be outwitted, far too readily, by his wily guardian. Craddle took it into his head to feign being overpowered with fatigue and sleep, and lay apparently unconscious by the side of his charge. The temptation was too great. Garroted as he was around his arms, Dick Burnell stealthily crawled a few inches away, stood up noiselessly, took one long step toward freedom, and the next instant a genuine American blade split his skull open from behind.

"There goes one enemy the less and a half pound of gold the more on the credit side of No. 1!" coolly remarked Craddle, as he wiped his bowie-knife on the coat of the would-be-runaway.

CHAPTER XXV.

. A NOBLE FELLOW .

AFTER registering this double gain in his own mind, Craddle returned to his friends and found them anxiously grouped around Pablo and feeling that now, more than ever, their very lives depended on the decision he was about to take.

Bras d'Acier remained speechless for what appeared to be at least five or six minutes.

"My friends," he said at last, "we have but one course open. To-morrow we are going to be attacked by fifteen or sixteen well-armed men, most of them good shots. We have no chance against them, now that we have only seven men ; besides, it would be exposing the poor ladies in our charge wantonly. We must avail ourselves of the darkness to leave the plateau immediately."

"Where shall we go?" inquired Benito.

"To the cavern we discovered the other day. There we can defend ourselves easily ; and as soon as we get horses, we can get away down by the valley which lies on the other side of the sierra."

"They'll soon see the camp has been abandoned," said Craddle.

"Let one of us stay behind. Who will devote himself?"

"I will, begor!" cried Patsy, scratching his ear almost off his head, as he always did when taking any serious determination.

"I will, too," said Loïc, apparently ashamed to put himself forward to such an extent.

"I am willing," added Vandeilles, though with visible hesitation.

It was evident that the possibility of his never again feeding his eyes on the gold he had so long yearned to possess was a powerful element in the case with him.

"Vandeilles volunteered the other day," said Bras d'Acier; "it is somebody else's turn to-night."

"I am the youngest and the weakest," observed the little Breton. "Patsy Green will be far more useful to you. It is my place to stay."

Vandeilles and O'Loughlin objected loudly, but Bras d'Acier silenced them.

"We have no time to waste in discussions," he said. "Now you, Vandeilles, with O'Loughlin and Benito, proceed to dig up the bags of gold and take them down to the foot of the plateau, and there fasten them to the saddle of one of the horses. Let the women go down with you and bring the most necessary things away with them. Take as many provisions and as much ammunition as you possibly can, and make as many journeys as time will permit."

"We have five hours, darkness before us yet," said Craddle.

"You, Craddle and Domingo, go and make holes in the rock just above our heads, and fill them with the mining powder we still have. Make as little noise as you can."

"That will be no easy job," remarked Craddle.

"Easier than you think. The rock is quite friable. Loïc will join you presently. I have to speak to him."

The two miners were soon at their appointed task. Presently, however, Craddle ceased to hear the low noise of his companion's drill. He looked for him, and not finding him at the hole he had directed him to make, he took it for granted that even so imminent a danger failed to spur the

vacquero's innate laziness, and that he would turn up again presently.

As he had not done so, however, at the end of a quarter of an hour, he made up his mind to step down to the plateau, and there perceived Domingo coming up toward him from the opposite direction.

"Where can you have been?" he asked him.

"I had forgotten one of my tools," answered the vacquero; and so saying he climbed up to the rock and set to work with an ardor which, for him, was extraordinary.

"That ain't all square or nat'ral!" said the Yankee to himself, with a dubious shake of his head.

And he was quite right. No tool had Domingo forgotten. He had sneaked away from his work for no other purpose than to try and overhear the conversation which Pablo said he wished to have with Loïc, and of which the rascal had guessed the importance; and what with the darkness, and the going to and fro of the miners, he had managed to get near enough to the creole and his young friend to make out what they said.

"Now you are quite determined, Loïc?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"Oh, quite!"

"I warn you that an almost certain death is awaiting you; you have not one chance of escape out of a thousand."

"That's no matter."

"Well, then, listen attentively, for I have many things to tell you. The stream flowing there at your feet from the summit of the angle of the mountain covers an enormous deposit of gold, just at the spot where the water falls on to the plateau. Gold has been accumulating there for centuries past, perhaps. There may be two hundred pounds of gold in that one place. Well, no matter! I discovered it a few days ago; but if I had let our companions know of it, it would only have excited their thirst for more. So I have covered it up with flat stones. Even now, did I tell them, they could not make up their minds to come away; and yet one hour's difference in the time of our starting may be a question of life or death for the three women we have with us."

"Poor women!" murmured Loïc, with deep emotion.

"In half an hour's time," continued Pablo, "everything

will be ready, and if heaven so wills it that we meet no obstacle, we shall reach the cavern before sunrise. As for you, friend, this is what you have to do. From what the prisoners said, I do not think the camp will be attacked to-night. Indeed, the silence that will reign about here will only appear, in the enemy's eye, one more ruse on our part. Still, make a little noise now and then. I am going to leave you three long matches and the means of lighting them. Lay them down as soon as we are gone. The moment the enemy will come toward the tents, retire to the angle of the mountain and fire a few shots to attract them in that direction. I shall get everything brought there that we intend leaving behind, and even eight or ten pounds of nuggets. The salteadores will make a rush for the spot. Set fire, then, to your matches. The mine will explode while they quarrel over our booty and will bring down on their heads the rocks that overhang the plateau. I examined them the other day; the least commotion will shake them off. You, my poor fellow, do your very utmost to escape the frightful avalanche! I dare not tell you I have much hope; yet I trust in God, who rewards courage and self-sacrifice. If your life is mercifully spared, come down and join us at the cavern; and, so as to let us know you are coming, give the peculiar whistle I taught you, three times in quick succession. One of us will keep on the lookout for you, day and night, at the opening. One word more about the nuggets in the stream. Cover them up with another layer of stones, for the violence of the explosion may bring them up to the surface, and whether we ever return for them or not, the ruffians must not have them. Now, do you quite understand me?"

"I understand it all."

"And your mind is fully made up?"

"Of course it is."

Bras d'Acier gazed for an instant at the little Breton, whose firm tone of voice revealed such unshakable determination. The *gambusino* was moved to the inmost depths of his soul. He grasped Loïc's hand and pressed it with an energy more eloquent than words.

Then he added:

"In your turn, Loïc, have you no instructions to leave with me?"

"Send my share of the nuggets to the Marquis de Tregastel, and get masses said for my soul, won't you?"

"Before God, I swear I will, friend, were I to go to France myself for no other purpose!"

Just then O'Loughlin called on Pablo about some detail in the preparations.

"I am going presently," he answered.

And throwing his arms around the little man's neck: "You are a brave fellow, a noble fellow," he added; "may God guard you!"

"Good-by, Don Pablo," said Loïc, "may you be happy! Tell Madame Vandeilles and Señora Rosina to pray for me."

Bras d'Acier pressed his hand once more and went off on a last round of inspection.

Every member of the party now came with a parting word to Kermainguy. The women wept bitterly. The men took him by the hand, but utterly broke down in their efforts to say something to him. In truth, it was a cruel moment for them to part with the lad who thus calmly laid down his life for them. Not even selfish Craddle himself could keep back the tears that rushed to his eyes.

On reaching the foot of the plateau, the three women mounted on horseback. Benito had taken a fourth horse and started ahead with them.

Pablo, with the rest of the men, formed the rear guard and protected the retreat.

No accident marred their progress in the dark, and they found Benito duly awaiting them at the mouth of the entrance to the cavern.

"Well, where is Domingo?" inquired Cypriana, looking all around for the vacquero.

Domingo had disappeared. His absence seemed to give Pablo considerable uneasiness.

"Maybe he'll have lost his way," remarked Patsy Green. "In the old country pigs can see in the dark, but—"

"No fear of that," interrupted Bras d'Acier; "a rastreador like him does not lose his way so easily. Besides, I know for certain he was with us not five minutes ago."

"Do you think he may have met with some accident?" asked Vandeilles.

"Some treacherous scheme or other is what I rather fear. In any case we can do nothing now but wait."

"What shall we do with the horses?" inquired Craddle.

"Poor things! We must fasten little bundles of mimosas to their tails and whip them away in the direction of the prairies. They will not stop until they are fairly exhausted. If only Goliath could come across their track and follow them it would give us a few days longer."

While he spoke, the bundles were made and securely tied to the tails of the eight horses. Then the poor animals were turned with their heads toward the valley, and, before a whip was used on them, they were away in full gallop.

In a second they had disappeared in the darkness, but for full ten minutes the sound of their mad career was heard in the distance, and the miners stood there mournfully listening to the dying echoes. It is so natural, even for the most callous heart, to get fond of the noble brutes that share our toils and dangers. Each one of the miners had a word of regret for his own horse. And what a pang had been, for Berthe, the loss of her poor Rita! But Bras d'Acier's plan was the only possible alternative. Introducing the horses into the cavern by the narrow opening was of course out of the question; and leaving them at the entrance would have been betraying their hiding-place to their enemies.

"Now," said Pablo, "have a good rest to-night. To-morrow, at any cost, we must find out a herd of wild horses and get a fresh supply."

"I am sure there must be some in the valley on the other side of the sierra," answered Benito.

"I think so, too; you must come with me to-morrow."

"If Domingo is back, we'll do well to take him with us; he is a splendid fellow at making out the pools where wild herds go for a drink."

"It is my opinion we shall not see Domingo again in our ranks," said Bras d'Acier, sadly. "Heaven grant he did not leave us to betray us!"

"If that's it, we are done for, as sure as there is a church in Glendalough!" groaned O'Loughlin.

"Anyway, that's no reason why we should leave this darned hole open all night," said practical-minded Craddle.

Pablo had no thought of doing so.

And, accordingly, all traces of their passage having been destroyed to a certain distance from the foot of the mountain, Benito, Craddle, and the *gambusino* displayed all their

skill in masking the opening, and then joined their friends inside the cavern.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TREACHERY REWARDED.

THE expression used by the unfortunate Englishman, killed by Craddle, was not inaccurate. Goliath's band was truly made up of "all sorts." The only "sort" it would have been hard to find under his command was an honest man.

The bandits, most of them runaways from their respective countries "for their countries' good," lived on nothing but plunder, and had no common link to bind them together but crime. Needless to say that with such creatures Goliath was a hero. Indeed, his influence with them was gradually destroying that of Manuelito, who had been their leader previous to his arrival. This fact was no secret to either of them; and a good opportunity was all that was required for one or the other to "get rid" of his rival. The means thereto were of very little consequence; no qualm of conscience was likely to disturb them on this or indeed any other point.

The failure of the night attack, which had been attempted against Goliath's wish, had naturally still increased his credit with his companions.

A few hours before sunrise, the six scouts returned from their expedition and were told the events of the night. Out of the seventeen men who had assailed Bras d'Acier's camp, nine had been either killed or made prisoners or dangerously wounded. They therefore now had only fourteen combatants, all told.

Sitting together in the woods, some seven or eight hundred feet above the plateau, the bandits held council.

Manuelito was evidently afraid to determine their future course, by himself, and sought the advice of each one, right and left of him.

"And yourself, Goliath, what's your opinion?" he asked, turning to the giant.

"Got none!" grumbled the latter.

"Here, cheese it!" called another American. "You are

the only coon here that knows that Bras d'Acier. Sing out, will you?"

"What's the use in me singing out when I am not minded?"

"True for him!" murmured two or three voices.

"*Caramba!*" exclaimed Manuelito, "because, just for once, we didn't do what you wanted, it's no reason why we should not mind you when you have a good advice to give!"

"Strikes me the advice I gave yesterday was not such a bad one!"

"And we know what we had to pay for not taking it," remarked one of the Americans.

"That may be," continued the salteador, "but we are talking of the present, not of the past."

"Come, come," suggested somebody, "we have no time to waste pitching into each other like that. Now we are all together again, shall we have another go at it straight away?"

"I say no, d—n you!" yelled Goliath. "We haven't even as many men as when we tried it first; and, of course, now they are on their guard down there."

"That's right," said Manuelito. "Let us wait till morning; but then, what shall we do?"

As he finished his query, a noise was heard some three or four hundred paces away, and presently two men who were keeping a watch in the vicinity of the encampment brought in a prisoner they had just made.

The prisoner,—no other than friend Domingo,—seemed in no way troubled in his peace of mind, and coolly surveyed the gallows'-birds around him.

"What's your business here?" asked Manuelito, in his harshest tone of voice.

"Are you the boss?" inquired Domingo.

"I am," answered the salteador.

"No, he isn't!" exclaimed several voices.

"Who is, then?" cried Manuelito.

"Goliath is," replied the same voices.

Manuelito turned round toward his opponents; at the same instant the giant shot him dead through the back.

"I guess I am boss now; ain't I, mates?" he added, as he gave a kick to the corpse of his late rival to get it out of his way.

"And now, who have we got here? Somehow, I'd lay

something, I heard your voice before. Why, may I!—it's Domingo!"

"Myself!"

"And you let yourself be caught, you stupid fool?"

"Not at all. I came of my own accord."

"A funny idea to come and get hanged of your own accord! We've got no powder to waste on you here!"

"I have come to bring you good news."

"Out with them, then, you cur!"

"I want to speak to the chief, señor. And as it seems you are boss now, order these noble *caballeros* to leave us alone for a moment."

"Do you hear what he says?" said Goliath, with a grunt, which, in another human creature, might have been a chuckle. "Get out of the way, will you? And no dilly-dallying either!"

"Let us go a little bit this way ourselves," said Domingo. "It will be safer."

When they were half a dozen yards away, Smithson thought he had gone quite far enough.

"Well?" said he, in an inquiring tone.

Domingo was buried deep in thought.

The rascal had heard Bras d'Acier telling Loïc about his latest discovery. Getting possession of that gold deposit for his own self had become the vacquero's only thought. But he should first manage to get rid of Bras d'Acier and his companions, and at the same time keep Goliath's hands off his treasure. At one time he had thought of letting the bandits attack the abandoned camp, so that Loïc might fire his mine; but, however attractive under more respects than one, this plan offered many a disadvantage, foremost among which was the probability of the gold being discovered by the salteadores. Should it escape their notice Loïc, who would straightway fall into their hands, would not hesitate (so Domingo argued) to reveal it to them so as to escape with his life. Lastly, what was more important still, Goliath's band, decimated as it was sure to be by the explosion, would no longer be a match for Bras d'Acier's friends.

"Say, do you take me for a fool?" howled the giant, angrily.

"Here you are," said Domingo; and, choosing what seemed the safer of the two alternatives so far as his own

personal designs were concerned, he told him where his enemies had taken refuge.

"Let's be off this minute!" cried Goliath. "We'll smoke them like so many jackals in their den."

"Just a minute!"

"Well?"

"Well, you don't imagine it's to shove it all into your belts that I came and told you about it!"

"Shove what into my belt?"

"Why, of course, the money. I must have my share of what you'll find in the cavern."

"You dug quite a lot of gold, then?"

"*Caramba*, we did!"

"How much?"

Domingo deemed it prudent not to tell the whole truth.

"Sixty or seventy thousand dollars," he said.

"Oh, indeed? And how much do you want out of that?"

"One third."

"Is that all? And suppose I squared up your claim with this?" said Goliath, pointing to the butt-end of his pistols.

"You wouldn't find the hiding-place, that's all."

"And suppose I kept you naked before a roasting fire for a little while, by way of loosening your tongue!"

Domingo made a bound, and disappeared in the darkness.

"Come back, you coyote! I was only having a joke."

The vacquero thought of the gold, and came back slowly. He unmistakably felt ill at ease.

"Will you let me have a third?" he asked.

"I will."

"On your oath?"

"Of course, on my oath."

"Pshaw! In any case, I've got something better than all your oaths."

"What is that?"

"Your own interest. Do you think I have told you all I know? Not such an ass as all that! I know how things are managed when it comes to the point! Come, call your men and let's go."

Goliath hailed the bandits, the baggage was hurriedly bundled up, and three quarters of an hour before dawn they set out on their murderous task.

At first they walked boldly on; then, as soon as the first

rays of the sun appeared over the hill, they crept on the remainder of their journey after Indian fashion, and eventually reached the mouth of the grotto, without perceiving anything that would cause them to suspect they had been discovered.

"Now the thing is to get in," said Domingo, who did not particularly care for the honor of heading the procession.

"You go first!" said the giant to him.

"Why so?"

"Why, you fool? Because they won't be startled to see you. They'll think you've only come back, that's all. And while they are all about you, asking you how you lost your way, we'll get in unknown to anybody."

In vain Domingo objected. Goliath, losing patience, pushed him bodily into the hole and followed him, his revolver in one hand and his bowie-knife between his teeth.

His worthy companions did the same, and all soon disappeared in the dark, damp passage.

The reader must now be told what had become of Bras d'Acier and his band.

Their first care had been to make all necessary arrangements to repel an attack on the part of their enemies, an attack which Domingo's disappearance rendered but too probable in Bras d'Acier's mind.

Along the passage itself, on the right and on the left, two excavations had been made, large enough for one man to ensconce himself in each.

O'Loughlin and Craddle, on whose presence of mind most reliance could be placed, were posted in these recesses. As soon as a certain number of the enemy would have made their way into the cavern, Bras d'Acier was to fire a shot and call out, "Forward, the miners!" Whereupon Patsy and Craddle would emerge from their hiding-places and bar the way for the other assailants, and at the same time stop the retreat of those who would have passed them already. To help them in this task, two lance-like weapons were manufactured for them, the handles of which were at right angles with the stem; thus armed, and thanks to the complete darkness of the passage, they had nothing to do, on the signal being given, but to thrust their lances respectively forward and backward to check their foes on each side. The

length of their lances protected them against the bowie-knives or the machetes, their recesses sheltered them from pistol shots ; their hands alone were in any way exposed.

All the rifles and pistols were loaded beforehand and laid on ledges within reach of the men. The latter stood quite close against the wall, in an angle formed by the tunneled passage, which protruded a couple of feet into the cavern.

Benito, who had been posted on guard near the outer opening, soon returned to his companions with the announcement that there was a noise of some sort at the foot of the mountain.

Every man ran to his appointed place.

A few minutes passed by. At last a faint rustling sound was heard, which none would have detected but people who expected it.

Presently it became more distinct, although every effort was evidently made to stifle it. From time to time there was a pause. The intruders were apparently listening ; then, reassured by the silence that reigned around them, they would continue their progress.

At last, the head of a man appeared at the inner mouth of the passage. Perceiving nothing in his way, the man crawled entirely out of the hole and stood up, a second groped out after him, then a third and a fourth. Just as the fifth emerged into the grotto, Pablo bounded on the first two and gave the expected signal.

Their acquaintance with the place and the bewilderment of their aggressors, still giddy from their long creeping and blinded by the darkness, gave an immense advantage to the miners.

Domingo was the first victim. Vandeilles's sword split his skull open. As to Goliath, struck in the stomach by Bras d'Acier's bullet, he rushed upon him with his bowie-knife. His dash had been such that he overthrew him with his weight, and both rolled on the ground. Giving up all hope of escaping from death, Goliath now thought of nothing but murdering his enemy. No attempt did he make at parrying a single blow. Right and left he blindly struck, despair and rage increasing still his giant strength. In vain did Pablo strain his every nerve to overpower him. Several times already Goliath had grasped the blade of his machete

in his naked hand, and with the greatest difficulty he had screwed it out of his mangled fingers.

His fists, his nails, his teeth, the giant used every weapon against his adversary. He roared like a wild beast and poured forth a flood of loathsome curses with every blow he struck.

By a desperate effort, Pablo succeeding at last in regaining his feet, Goliath still clinging to his belt; alas, his pistols had dropped out during his struggle; the giant, by chance, laid his hand on one, and yelled with fiendish joy. Pablo tore himself off and bounded some six or eight feet away from him; then, while his pursuer groped cautiously forward and tried to get a glimpse of him in the dark, he hastily took off his jacket, stuck it on the end of his machete and held it up at arm's length, at the same time crouching to the ground as low as he could.

Goliath saw the glitter of the buttons before him, and fired. Before the sound of the shot had died away, Pablo had sprung on him in his turn and stabbed him twice in the breast with his machete. With death's hand upon him, Goliath made a dart forward like a bull making his last charge. But Bras d'Acier had anticipated the maneuver. The upturned point of his machete was awaiting the giant's fall, and the next instant it was buried to the hilt in his breast by his own weight. A groan,—one last, faltering curse,—Goliath lay a hideous corpse.

None of Pablo's companions had been able to come to his aid; each had a salteador to encounter. No sooner had Vandeilles dispatched Domingo, than he had been seized round the throat by a bushranger whose strength was quite a match for him. Had it not been for his knowledge of the place, Vandeilles would probably have been overcome; but, fortunately for him, his assailant stumbled over a rock and became an easy prey for him.

Meanwhile O'Loughlin and Benito did their utmost against the three others and against two newcomers who had crawled in during the struggle, followed by the Irishman.

Just as the last of the aggressors fell to the ground, Craddle suddenly appeared, and showing the stem of his lance, which had been cut across within a few inches of the blade:

"They are after me," he whispered, "quick, be ready !"

The corpses were hastily huddled up in a corner and the miners resumed their former coign of vantage in the angle of the cavern.

Only five were seen coming out of the aperture and, in a moment, were added to the number of the dead.

Presently Pablo fancied he perceived something gliding along the soil toward the opening. He was just in time to catch the would-be runaway by the leg, but too late to prevent his giving the alarm to such of his friends as were still creeping in the passage. Bras d'Acier dragged him forcibly out of it and threw him to Craddle, who taught him that "taking French leave was out of fashion in these parts"; as to the uncivilized world, he didn't know.

Then the *gambusino* discharged his revolver, shot after shot, in the tunnel. The groans of pain and cries of rage that immediately followed, told how the bullets had done their frightful work.

"We must give chase," said Pablo, "follow me !"

So saying, he entered the narrow tunnel.

Two corpses lying helplessly in his way caused him some trouble and delay, for there was room but for one person at a time. He managed, however, to slide them into the recesses lately occupied by Craddle and O'Loughlin, and succeeded in reaching the outer air.

The bushrangers were there, standing in a group about forty yards from the mountain, apparently holding a council. There were but seven of them left.

Seeing the miners coming out one by one, apparently unmolested by any one of their gang, they took in the situation at a glance and made all possible haste toward a clump of trees at a distance of some fifty paces.

Three of them were stopped in their flight by one shot each from Pablo, Craddle, and O'Loughlin; and the remaining four, giving up their cause as lost, quickly disappeared in the depths of the forest.

Both Bras d'Acier and Benito might have been swift-footed enough to overtake them; but the former had been wounded in the leg by Goliath; and, though not serious, his wound would render him incapable of displaying his habitual powers.

As to the *capataz*, he was not over anxious to face, alone

and too closely, ruffians who were armed with rifles and carbines.

"I believe we may let them go," he said to Bras d'Acier. "I warrant they won't trouble us again in a hurry. I should not be surprised if they climbed over the sierra again and went back the way they came!"

"Then I move we get back to the cavern," said Craddle, "I reckon I'd eat a horse this minute, and no need of ketchup?"

"If so, let us make haste," replied Pablo; "we must run and see what has become of poor Loïc."

The miners crept back to their hiding-place.

Berthe and Rosina came running toward them, and heard with a very natural joy the complete routing of their assailants.

The men were but slightly hurt. Craddle alone had received a deep cut of a bowie-knife in his shoulder.

"What about Cypriana?" inquired Bras d'Acier.

"At first she threw herself down on the corpse of Domingo, shrieking and crying," said Rosina, "but she has calmed down a little."

"Did she say nothing about us, not a word of revenge?"

"She did; but you must not attach too great importance to the first outburst of her grief."

"What shall we do with these wretches?" called Vandailles, pointing to the heap of salteadores.

"Nothing to do with them but drop them out of the cavern," said Benito.

And although Pablo would not have abandoned even such undeserving foes without burial, time would not permit him to cast a thought on the matter for the present; Loïc had far more pressing claims on his immediate attention.

No sooner, therefore, had they taken a little food, than they all started for the old encampment, save O'Loughlin and Craddle, who were left to guard the cavern, and Cypriana who declined to leave it.

To the inexpressible joy of all, brave Loïc was found quietly waiting on the very spot where Bras d'Acier had left him. He had heard and seen nothing, and was almost ashamed to confess it.

With a heart relieved of a crushing weight, Bras d'Acier brought back the party to the cavern, and that same night,

by way of compensating them for the hardships of the day, he told his companions his latest discovery at the foot of the waterfall.

It was agreed that O'Loughlin and Vandeilles would extract the gold and convey it to the cavern. Meanwhile Bras d'Acier and Benito would endeavor to find the *aguage*, for the discovery of which the *capataz* had so hastily proffered Domingo's services the day before. Craddle, unable to work, and Loïc, would stay in the cavern with Madame Vandeilles, Rosina, and Cypriana. And next morning, by daybreak, these various arrangements were carried into effect.

In two days the gold deposit had been all gathered, and the different objects they had at first left on the plateau were brought to the grotto. This two-days' work had yielded close on 170 pounds of gold.

The search undertaken by Bras d'Acier and Benito was not so speedily crowned with success. Not until their fifth day did they alight on the traces of a herd, and then the difficulty of hunting a *cavallada mestena* with five available men remained to be contended with.

"I know one way," observed Benito. "Let us block the passage up entirely with stones, then let us get down along the rock by means of a ladder, and leave the women in the cavern. They can pull up the ladder when we have all got down, and there they will be in a regular fortress."

"One man should stop with them," objected Bras d'Acier.

"Then we shall be too few to drive the *cavallada* into the corral."

"Benito is right," said Vandeilles.

"I could suggest another way," ventured Berthe. "We three women are good walkers. We might go as far as the *aguage* with you. Besides, how would you do for your meals?"

"The more so as we may be two or three days building up the corral," replied Benito.

"Another reason why we should accompany you, then," added Berthe. "What do you say, Rosina?"

"Of course it is," rejoined Rosina.

"And what about the dear old baggage?" asked Craddle.

"Why not leave it here?"

"Very well, as you like," said Pablo, after a few moments' reflection. "Let us get ready to-night."

"What shall we take away?"

"Hatchets, ropes, spurs, bozals, halters, and a change of lassos."

"And the saddles?" inquired Loïc.

"We have them still," answered Vandeilles. "Luckily we kept them and the bridles too when we sent our poor horses away."

"By the same token," exclaimed Patsy, "suppose we'd try and go hunt for them."

"No, Patsy," replied Pablo. "If ever we did find them again, it would be a fortnight before we could fetch them here all around to this side of the sierra!"

"By way of provisions, what do we take away?" Craddle's voice was heard to ask.

"Flour to make the *pinole*, tea, brandy and salt," answered Bras d'Acier. "And Craddle, wounded as he is, will stop here to pull up the ladder after us and throw it down to us when we come back."

"I'll stay, too, I may as well!" said Cypriana.

"Who cares whether you do or not?" grumbled Vandeilles. "Let us get everything ready."

The preparations were made. Pablo had the sacks of gold buried in a spot known only to himself and to the three men (Vandeilles, O'Loughlin and Loïc) whom he had employed for the purpose. And the following morning the party, safely landed at the foot of their rock, started on its hunting expedition.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TWO DIFFERENT HUNTS.

ALMOST the whole of the first day was taken up by the journey to the *aguage*.

The erection of the corral was barely completed by Thursday, and then, lest the horses should notice the presence of man and cease coming to the spot when all was now ready for their reception, the miners left the vicinity of the pool for a couple of days.

Vandeilles and O'Loughlin availed themselves of it to

return to the cavern and bring back an additional supply of provisions. Seeing that the hunting operations would not now last more than a couple of days, Craddle thought he might relieve himself of his guard at the cavern and accompanied them.

On hearing that Cypriana had been left by herself, Bras d'Acier did not conceal his displeasure.

"It was wrong of you to leave your post," he said to the Yankee.

"Are you afraid about the gold?"

"I am afraid of Cypriana."

"By herself, what harm can she do us?"

"It is always possible to do harm," replied Bras d'Acier; "but let it be. To-morrow, somebody must run up and see that all is right."

Needless to record the numerous details of the laborious chase undertaken the following morning by the small band at Pablo's disposal. Vandeilles, O'Loughlin, Benito and the *gambusino* himself, spent the whole forenoon beating the neighborhood to drive the wild horses in the direction of the pool. Craddle and Kermainguy were posted at each *estero* of the corral with instructions to close them as soon as ever the *cavallada* had entered.

As to Berthe and Rosina, a kind of raised platform was improvised for them between the main branches of two ahuehuelts, whence they could see everything in safety.

By one o'clock, some forty horses were trapped inside the corral, and there they neighed and leaped up in the air, bit the palisade and kicked it furiously, snorting, rearing, biting each other, a prey to an inconceivable paroxysm of rage. Some tried to clear the fence of the corral, which rose to a height of nine or ten feet above the ground, but failed in their mad attempts and fell back into their lumber prison, more desperate than ever.

With a deal of trouble and "any amount of sloothering," as Patsy Green put it, seven were separated from the rest and goaded into a smaller corral constructed near the larger one for the very purpose; and the hunters who had executed this latter part of their maneuvers from the top of the paling, now stepped down among their infuriated prisoners.

As soon as one of these was lassoed, a thick *frazada* or

blanket was thrown over his eyes. And while he stood thus blinded, trembling in every limb, the heavy, high-pommeled Mexican saddle was laid on his back and his lip was caught in the bozal, which was to do duty for a bridle as well as a clavezon.

Indeed, two of them showed such resistance that they had to be brought to the ground before they could be even blindfolded, which was done by lassoing their forelegs and their hindlegs separately and then jerking the two lassos in opposite directions.

Bras d'Acier and Benito, more expert at this kind of work than their comrades, helped them on to their saddles, and eventually mounted the two spirited animals they had selected for themselves.

Craddle was appointed to remain with the two women during the next stage of the proceedings.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Berthe with a shudder, as she saw the unbroken animals madly careering down the valley, "they will surely kill the men against the trees or the rocks!"

"Oh no!" replied her little Spanish friend with a certain pride; "little you know the horsemen of our country yet, Berthe. The others may get thrown off, perhaps; but you may be sure Bras d'Acier and Benito will bring their horses home thoroughly *quebrantados*."

"But my husband?"

"For a Frenchman, he rides uncommonly well. The worst rider of all is Patsy Green; but he is so cool-headed, and he has such a mighty 'lump of a fist', as he would say himself, that he may hold on all through."

"How long will they be away?"

"Two or three hours, perhaps more. It will depend on the strength of the horses and the skill of each cavalier, of course. And you may well imagine they will not keep together. You will see them coming back one by one—and in such a plight! Their clothes in rags, their faces and hands torn and bleeding, all of them except Mr. de Verrières. I know not how he manages to bend over his saddle, but I never saw a scratch on his handsome face yet. In my father's hacienda I saw the best horse-breakers in the country; but not one of them could be compared with him."

"Will not the other horses try to run away in the mean time?" said Berthe, unable to think of anything better to say so as to change the conversation.

"Try they will, but how can they with such an insurmountable wall around them? Berthe, I could tell them, I could, what it is to battle against fate!"

As Rosina had said, the hunters reappeared, one by one, their horses reeking with sweat and blood. Bras d'Acier alone gave no sign of life.

While waiting for the clew of this mysterious delay, Benito, who had returned first, was preparing to break another horse, when the creole was perceived coming up at full gallop, nor did he rein his panting steed until he was within a couple of feet of his friends.

"I am pursued by a band of Indians," he said hastily. "Run quick to the cavern and keep inside, very quietly. I managed to throw them off my track and get a little advance on them, but they will be after me again in a moment. Do go; they are Apaches! Take Madame on your horse with you, Vandeilles; Benito will do likewise with la Señora Rosina. When you get home, let the horses go free and keep the saddles. Now be off."

"Holy Moses, what about yourself, Don Pablo?" asked O'Loughlin.

"I'll run in search of the Indians, will get them to follow me again and draw them far away in another direction before they light on the corral and find your track."

"Then you'll gallop home like the devil, won't you?" continued the good-hearted Irishman, who would fain have offered to accompany his hero, but who fancied he saw in every glance of Pablo's eye a reminder of the sacred trust reposed in him.

"The Indians often divide themselves in two parties in a case like this," said Benito. "You ought to take somebody with you to help you, or to take your place if anything happened you."

"Let me go with you, Bras d'Acier!" cried Loïc. "For that sort of thing I can be just as useful as anybody else."

"As you like, my good little fellow," said Bras d'Acier, as he tightened up his saddle and bathed the fuming nostrils of his mount with cold water. "Come on! Take care of

your face and eyes when we dive into the thorns yonder. Good-by, friends ! ”

And as the two forlorn hopes disappeared out of sight, the remainder of the party turned their horses' heads toward the sierra. Nor was it an easy task at first to compel them to move in a given direction according to the will of their late captors. Once started, however, they flew to the foot of the cavern in one unbroken gallop.

And now the affrighted fugitives called aloud to Cypriana to throw down the ladder. There was no sign of the woman, although she had promised to keep on the lookout on this side of the cavern.

“ Hurry up ! ” cried Craddle ; “ the Indians are after us. ”

As he finished these words Cypriana put out her head over the rock.

“ Ah, the Indians are after you, are they ? ” she said, with a strange accent.

“ Make haste and throw down that ladder ! ” shouted Vandeilles.

“ Monsieur Vandeilles did not ask me if I choose to throw it down ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I mean that I have had quite enough of your slights and contempt this long time ! Besides, you have killed my Domingo and I am going to pay you off for it.—Now is my turn. ”

“ Cypriana, ” cried Benito, interrupting Vandeilles, whose angry words could not fail to make matters worse, “ Domingo betrayed all of us, you as well as ourselves. He attacked us, we did not attack him ; and if he had not been killed you would not be alive now, any more than the rest of us. ”

But Cypriana was not open to any argument, however just or reasonable. Ever since the meeting of Berthe and Rosina, she had nursed hopes of dire revenge against the Frenchwoman, against her husband, against Pablo, against everybody in general. Domingo's death had naturally embittered her feelings, but in reality her thirst for vengeance sprang much more from her wounded dignity than from her affection for the vacquero.

In vain they tried to make her understand that she was rushing to death herself, that, alone in these solitudes, she

should needs die of starvation, be devoured by wild beasts, or fall a prey to the Indians.

Exasperated by her solitary musings and her long pent-up hatred, the woman seemed to relish the thought of avenging herself, even at the price of her own life.

Nor did Berthe's and Rosina's tearful entreaties prove more successful with her than the reasonings or the threats of the miners.

The first thought of the latter was naturally to try and climb up the rock, but it was so steep and so smooth that the attempt was utterly impracticable.

Various suggesions were tendered ; none coped with the formidable difficulty ; and yet every instant was precious ; at any moment the Indians might appear, and the little caravan, caught in a veritable cul-de-sac, would inevitably be butchered.

In the middle of their helpless consultation, the gallop of a horse was heard ; as a last act of despair they seized their arms and stood on the defensive. It was Bras d'Acier.

"What are you doing there ?" he asked tremblingly. "The Indians are on my track. They will be here in ten minutes !"

They explained Cypriana's treachery to him in two words, and ere he had time to reply Craddle exclaimed that he had an idea.

"We have our hatchets," he said. "Let us cut three of those fir trees, fasten two of them by the top, lean them against the rock with their feet stuck apart from each other into the ground, and use them as a support for the third. With a few notches here and there I guess we could climb them up !"

"Yes, that is feasible," said Pablo. "Lose no time in talking. Quick, set to work ; do what he says.—Did Loïc return yet ?"

"Not yet," replied Berthe.

"The unfortunate lad will have been captured ! An arrow struck him in the arm a while ago. I fear he may have been unable to manage his horse after that."

"You met the Indians then, Don Pablo ?"

"Yes. They sent us a volley of arrows. Loïc kept up with me for some time, but I suppose he lost sight of me.

His horse may have been wounded ; I must go back and look for him ! ”

“ What if the Indians come before the señoras are safe up there,” said Benito.

“ Poor Loïc,” murmured Bras d’Acier. “ Hark ! Stop your hatchets—Silence ! ”

A faint sound of horses’ hoofs could be heard in the distance.

“ Here they are ! ” said Pablo. “ If they come as far as this, it is all over with us. I must run and lead them off again. Make no noise, don’t strike a single blow for some time. Good-by ! ”

And so saying he had leaped on the horse that showed least signs of fatigue and was away.

There was a moment of terrible anxiety. For two or three minutes the gallop of the Indians drew nearer and nearer. The miners stood in breathless suspense. Soon, however, the sound grew fainter, and it was not long ere they resumed their task with feverish activity.

Despite the increasing darkness, they succeeded without too much delay in constructing the ladder so opportunely proposed by Craddle.

The huge letter Y formed by the three fir trees was laid head downward against the rock, and with the greatest caution, so as not to draw the attention of Cypriana, who had given no sign of life for some time past.

Then, Benito, the nimblest and the lightest of the miners, noiselessly climbed his way up. On reaching the summit of the third tree, he became aware for the first time that it barely came within three feet of the level of the grotto. Nothing daunted, he stretched himself up at full length, buried his nails into the fissures of the ledge and lifted himself up to it by the strength of his wrists.

Hitherto the darkness of the night had prevented Cypriana from seeing the miners’ work, but the scratching of Benito’s boots against the rock did not escape her, and just as she leaned over the ledge at one corner of the aperture, he jerked himself up on the ledge beside her. Her first movement was to push him off, but the *capataz* had his two knees on the rock already and resisted. Now, driven to desperation, she made a wild thrust at him with her navaja and

made a deep gash in his left shoulder. The next moment one stab of his knife had laid her low.

Luckily, the fiend-like creature had refrained (probably for her own sake) from destroying the ladder. Benito found it where it had been fastened for use, and five minutes later the little party was in safety in their aerie-like fortress.

A couple of hours after, as Vandeilles was about calling up O'Loughlin to relieve him of his watch, three faintly-uttered jackal's yelps came up to his ear and he hastened to throw down the ladder to Bras d'Acier.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HARROWING TALE.

"ANY news of Loïc?" inquired Pablo, as he entered the cavern.

"Nothing."

"Then I was not mistaken. The poor lad has been caught. In any case we shall soon know, for the Apaches will be here presently. They have lost sight of me this long time, but, to my knowledge, they are too good rastreadores not to get on my track again immediately."

"Where is your horse?"

"I have just let him free; he is now going like the wind toward the *cavallada*. My saddle is hidden in a mimosa bush."

"Is there no use to try and bring help to poor Loïc, Don Pablo?" asked O'Loughlin. "Couldn't I go down to the valley and ferret about for him?"

"You would not find him, and you might give the Indians an idea of where we are."

"What shall we do, then?" said Craddle.

"We shall get away by the same passage as we came."

"But then we—"

"Listen!" interrupted Bras d'Acier. "Hush!"

All ears were on the stretch. The hoofs of several horses resounded on the stony soil.

"The Indians!" murmured Pablo, and he lay flat near the opening of the cavern, so that his forehead alone was above the level of the rock.

It was so dark that he could not distinguish either the horses or their riders, but he could guess their various movements by the different sounds which came up from the valley.

He heard the Indians come up to the foot of the mountain, dismount, and leave their mustangs free to graze up and down.

Then some of them lit a large fire some seven or eight hundred feet from the cavern. Others, supplied with burning branches, began to search along the ground for traces of their enemies, and it was not long ere they had followed them right to the foot of the rock. There they could be seen stooping over the ground and looking all around, as though wondering what could have become of the white people who had left their footprints there. For over an hour they scrutinized the rock as high as they could do so from the ground, but the miners had anticipated them, and had taken their precautions accordingly.

And now the camp fire, into which a quantity of dry wood had just been added, threw out a brighter flame and lit up a radius of some twenty-five or thirty paces all around.

"They have captured Loïc," Pablo whispered to Vandailles, who was lying near him.

The Frenchman followed the direction of Bras d'Acier's finger, and perceived Kermainguy stretched on the ground near the fire. The poor fellow seemed very tightly bound. His face was covered with blood; his eyes were half closed, apparently from exhaustion.

Soon one of the Indians, probably the chief, went over to the little Breton, removed part of his bonds, compelled him to stand up, and began to talk to him with great animation. At times, it seemed as though he were making tempting promises to him; at other times he brandished his machete over the prisoner's head with frantic gesticulations. Loïc remained impassible.

"They want him to tell them what has become of us," said Pablo. "See, they are taking him to the foot of the mountain, where, no doubt they found our last imprints."

It was all but too true, and brave Kermainguy obeyed the voice of his conscience but too nobly; for they immediately brought him back to the fire, whereupon two of them planted a big stake into the ground within a few paces of the flames;

the little Breton was stripped of his garments, and they fastened him to the tree.

"What the devil are they going to do?" asked Vandeilles.

"Subject the poor lad to torture to make him betray us," answered Pablo, with faltering voice.

"My soul! we can't let him perish in that way!" said Vandeilles. "We must—"

"Hush!" replied Pablo. "Listen to me. Go, all of you, and clear out the passage by which we came here the other day. When you have about done, come and tell me; we shall send the women on ahead, under charge of two of us, and then we shall do all that man can do to save poor Loïc."

"Why, it'll be hours before we can get right through," remarked Patsy, "and meanwhile he can be dead twenty times over."

"God knows how willingly I would lay down my own life in exchange for his; but, for the sake of one, I cannot sacrifice seven persons.

"Well, then, the devil's in it if I don't go down all alone by myself!" gasped the Irishman, whose emotion choked him; and with the words still on his lips he caught hold of a rope to let himself down.

Pablo took the rope from him in silence with his characteristic firmness, and led him to the spot where Berthe and Rosina had retired on the *gambusino's* advice.

"Look, O'Loughlin," he said to him, "do you want these poor creatures to be in the hands of the Indians before an hour from now?"

"I'll only expose my own self, sure!"

"And by yourself do you think you can save Loïc? Of course not! And what will be the result of your rashness? The savages will wonder where you came from; they will find us out in no time—and then Patsy—whatever the consequences may be, I lay them on your soul!"

O'Loughlin strode off to a corner to keep his grief from bursting out.

As to Pablo, he drew near to Berthe and Rosina:

"We are going to be obliged to flee even from this hiding place," he said. "Gather up provisions in great haste. Each one will take his own supply as well as his own share of gold with him, for at any moment we may be separated."

And after giving them instructions as to what they had to do for the immediate present, he went back to his post of observation.

Kermainguy was there, bound to the tree ; the flames had spread nearer to him and must have caused him intense torture. Just now the Indians were indulging in the pastime of shooting their arrows as close to his body as possible without touching him. Some of the less skillful, however, must have grazed their luckless victim, for here and there streaks of blood marbled his skin. Now and then, the chief would order the shooting to cease and would come over to Kermainguy, now with a coaxing air, now in a threatening attitude. A significant shake of the head was Loïc's uniform answer.

His persecutors soon grew weary of this useless torturing and tried another kind. Some of them picked some live coals out of the fire and drew them lightly along on various parts of Loïc's body. His frame could plainly be seen shuddering and writhing in agony.

The horrible sight made such an impression on the creole that his whole being trembled and shrank every time that an Indian approached Loïc with his brand.

Despite his extraordinary control over himself he should needs turn his eyes away at times ; and would then run and ascertain how his companions were progressing with their work.

Three endless quarters of an hour were thus spent by Bras d'Acier.

He was about starting once more to have a look at his men, when he heard a step behind him. It was Benito.

"Quite finished?" he asked.

"No, thank God."

"How, 'thank God'?"

"Because there are Indians on that side as well as on this."

"Indians! Are you quite sure?"

"Sure! Worse luck!"

"How do you know?"

"There was a small crevice above a piece of rock that we forced into the passage the other day. I stuck my pike through it to see how much more soil we had to remove, and as I did so I thought I saw the glitter of a flame through the

chink ; I widened it a little, and, sure enough, there was a fire blazing, with several men sitting around it ; others paced up and down before it ; we could not reckon them, but I tell you there is a great number."

For a moment, in spite of his innate fearlessness, Pablo felt crushed by the announcement of this new calamity.

"So, we are surrounded," he murmured at last. "Well—come ! have a good look at your weapons, take your gold and the provisions I have had prepared, and then—may God protect us !"

Ten minutes later the miners were ready. Pablo and O'Loughlin had taken with them a portion of the gold that belonged to Vandeilles. He had but eighty pounds of it about him ; Berthe had taken two ten-pound bags ; each of the other men carried his own share.

The most difficult part of the whole undertaking was now to climb down along the rocks without attracting the attention of the Indians.

The latter, fortunately, had suspended for a time the torturing of their prisoner. Overcome by fatigue and sleep, they had probably postponed to the following day the pleasure, so dearly relished by an Apache, of witnessing the sufferings of an enemy. They had ceased to add fresh fuel to the fire ; it was not quite out yet, but the ash-covered embers shed no light around. One by one they gathered around it, and all were soon fast asleep. Alone, two or three sentinels watched at a distance on the opposite side of the camp ; no necessity had there seemed to be for a guard on this side, so safely protected were they by that huge stone wall. As to Loïc, he had been left, bound to his stake, after having been compelled to swallow some food ; and there he stood, or rather hung from his chains, with bleeding scalds, and shivering with fever, pain, and cold.

After a careful survey of the situation, Pablo turned to his friends and whispered to them :

"Now, let us thoroughly understand what we are going to do. The horses of these savages are there to the right, against the little grove that we have often noticed from here. Craddle and I are going to make a rush for Loïc and do our very utmost to save him. In the confusion that will

follow, you five run to that grove, catch some of the mustangs, and flee for your lives in the direction of our old corral; from there keep straight on along the river, and never stop till your horses drop with exhaustion. Take good care to drive all the other mustangs before you, so that the Indians may have none to pursue you with. Before joining you, however, Benito must hold two horses in readiness for us as soon as we drag Loïc away."

"How shall I know you are coming?" asked Benito; "it is pitch dark."

"I shall bark like a wolf three times in succession."

"But, suppose I am caught or killed?"

"Rather than expose yourself to that, run away the moment you see the Indians."

"How shall we get down?" inquired Vandeilles.

"The women by the ladder, the men with knotted ropes that I have prepared myself."

"Say, we had better make haste!" said Benito. "I don't know if the Indians in the Valley del Desierto have heard us or noticed any cracks we may have made in the ground, but they are at work clearing out the passage themselves, now."

"We must be gone!" said Pablo; and yet he could not help pausing—"Your hands, friends," he added. "This time, heaven knows when or where—if ever—I may press them again. Good-by!—Come away!"

There was no time to heed the sobs which alone re-echoed his words. With marvelous agility and caution Benito and he were down in a moment to hold the foot of the ladder steady for Berthe and Rosina. More precipitate was the descent of the two women; they had distinctly heard the voices of the Indians clearing their way into the cavern. Still, as the only sentinels posted by Loïc's captors concentrated their whole attention toward the prairies, the entire party succeeded in reaching the ground unobserved.

"Now, take to the right," said Pablo in Vandeilles's ear, "and crawl as far as you can; when you think it dangerous to go farther imitate the yelp of a jackal twice; it will be the signal for me to rush for Loïc. Then hide down and wait. When you hear the whooping of the Indians around us, run on to the horses. Should you manage to get right round their bivouac and reach up to the mustangs without

being seen (the grass is so tall), repeat your cry three times when you are in your saddle. Go! God guard you! Take as long a round as you can; the waving of the grass might betray you."

Vandeilles and O'Loughlin disappeared with Berthe and Rosina; Benito had already started on ahead.

Craddle and Bras d'Acier remained crouched at the foot of the sierra and under its dark shadow. One hour, every minute of which seemed a day, wore its weary length along. Not a sound broke the stillness of the valley.

At last the harsh cry of the jackal rent the air once—twice—three times!

"Thank God! They, at least, are saved!" murmured Pablo. "Now, for Loïc!"

"Hush!" said Craddle.

A faint rustle was heard along the rock over their heads; the ropes and the ladders were being slowly drawn up.

"They have got into our cavern," said Pablo; "they saw these Apaches and are afraid to be attacked. I have an idea. Creep away there to the left, and dash on for Loïc when you hear my pistol shot!"

At the same moment the Indian sentinels uttered a cry of alarm and ran toward the clump of trees whence they had just heard the galloping of the mustangs, driven or ridden away by Bras d'Acier's friends.

In less than a minute the whole camp was on foot.

That instant had been sufficient for Pablo to fasten a few handfuls of dry grass to the extremity of the ladder.

He now set them on fire with two shots of his revolver, dashed forward along the ground in the middle of the tall grass and joined Craddle just as the latter stood up to advance toward Loïc.

The Indians leaped in the wildest excitement toward the sierra; the sentinels gave chase after the mustangs, but, accustomed as they were to the many stratagems of the other tribes, the Apaches took it for granted that the flight of the horses was but a feint to divert their attention away from the rock, and in truth the blazing ladder, dangling before their eyes, was to them proof evident that there were enemies lurking about in this very part of the mountain.

Pablo and Craddle availed themselves of this moment,

when all was tumult and indecision, to rush to the unguarded prisoner ; in the twinkling of an eye his bonds were cut asunder, and away they ran with their precious burden.

The *gambusino* then gave the preconcerted signal to Benito. The answer came immediately and the *capataz* appeared with two horses besides his own.

The animals, scared beyond expression by the presence of the white men, had no bridles ; each of the miners had his own round his shoulders, but the short time it took them to put them on the recalcitrant mustangs enabled a half-dozen Indians to overtake them.

"Benito," said Bras d'Acier, "as soon as you are ready, take Loïc in front of you and gallop away."

And while Craddle struggled with the two other horses to force the bits into their mouths, the *gambusino* faced their pursuers.

One of them, though mortally wounded, caught hold of his leg and well-nigh threw him to the ground, but a blow from the butt-end of his revolver broke his skull open.

Another, who had succeeded in leaping up half-way on one of the horses and was making desperate efforts to start him off, fared no better than his companion.

At last, with a murderous discharge from both their revolvers, Pablo and Craddle galloped furiously away.

Benito's horse, having a double weight to carry, they soon overtook him.

"How is Loïc ?" was their anxious inquiry.

"I think he is unconscious," answered Benito. "He is in a frightful state ! He'll never get over it. Maybe he is dead already."

"Give him to me," said Bras d'Acier, "your horse must be tired."

And taking Loïc before him, he laid his hand on the heart of the little sufferer.

"Well ?" asked Craddle.

"He is alive still," he replied ; but there was something in his voice that sent a chill through the inquirer's heart.

At the first stream they passed by, he bathed the poor lad's face with cold water. The moribund seemed to recover his senses somewhat.

"How do you feel, my poor Loïc?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"I am past minding now,—but the others?"

"They are all right, they are on ahead."

"Bras d'Acier!" interrupted Craddle, "I guess some of the mustangs have been left behind. I hear four or five of them tearing down this way, and you bet they have Apaches on their backs."

"Let us keep up the race," said Pablo. "If they should come up to us now, we are a match for them this time."

About five in the morning, as the sun peeped over the horizon, they found themselves not far from the corral.

"Let us pause a moment," suggested Pablo, whose horse began to give way under his double burden, for he had felt unable to part with poor Loïc.

"What is your idea?" inquired Craddle.

"We are going to wait here for the Indians who are after us, and prevent their ever reaching our friends in front of us. And then we shall give a run to the corral."

"That will take up a good deal of our time."

"It may; but in return we shall have fresh horses; and, above all, we shall release all the others out of the corral; which if we did not, our pursuers might supply themselves with fresh mounts there."

"You are always right, Bras d'Acier," answered Craddle. "Let us wait."

Ten minutes after, seven Indians appeared in the distance, and, as they galloped nearer, each of them was seen to be armed with a sword or a macana, a bow and a few arrows.

Not perceiving the white men, who had concealed themselves in the wood, the savages continued to urge their steeds onward. As they came within forty paces of the miners. Pablo gave the word of command, and the three carbines were discharged. One of the Indians fell dead on the spot. Two others clung desperately to the mane of their horses; one of them, however, dropped almost immediately, and as the other's horse was turning to run away, a bullet from Bras d'Acier's gun brought him to his knee. The poor animal bounded up again, gave a few wild leaps and rolled to the ground, crushing his rider under him.

Meanwhile the four others attacked the miners with the fiercest howls. Craddle, always self-composed, allowed one

of them to come within ten paces of him and shot him dead through the chest. A fifth, more astute than the last, made his horse shy just as the Yankee was covering him; the bullet struck the mustang in the neck, and before Craddle had time to fire again his cheek was torn by an arrow, half an inch below his eye. The shock was so great and so painful that he fell backward, almost fainting. Fortunately for him the Indian had the greatest difficulty to manage his mustang, goaded to madness by the wound in his neck, and by the time he had his sword uplifted over Craddle's head he received a stab of Pablo's machete through the heart.

Of the remaining Apaches, one had been lassoed and subsequently poniarded by Benito; the only other had been laid low by Bras d'Acier.

"Now, as quick as we can to the corral!" said the latter. "Let us take their horses to bring us there, they are less tired than ours; their saddles, too, may be useful to us, although they are very uncomfortable."

"As to these animals," said Craddle, who had long since regained his feet, "if we don't hamstring them, I reckon they'll go back to the cavern and offer their services."

The cruel, but too necessary operation was performed, and in a few moments the corral had been reached.

With the fresh horses they obtained there, and sustained by a strength of will increased manifold by the dangers of the situation, the miners now made rapid progress.

Loïc continued in the same comatose state, save for a short instant, when he entreated Pablo, in a faint whisper, to "Go on—after the others—quick, for the good God's sake!"

It seemed as though the poor fellow's only wish was to know, ere he died, that those for whom he had so cheerfully sacrificed himself were all saved.

About eight o'clock in the morning, the river which Pablo had instructed his friends to follow was in sight.

"It will not be long now before we overtake them," he remarked. "I see by the footprints on the ground that their horses are worn out. One of them actually fell on this mound. He cannot go much farther."

This, the Horses' River, is half a mile in width in this locality. In the middle a steep rock stood up, covered with trees and thick shrubs,

It was opposite this island that Vandeilles, Berthe, Rosina, and O'Loughlin were found waiting by the side of their exhausted horses.

It were idle to describe the joy of the meeting, incomplete though it was, owing to the desperate condition of the chief actor in their rescue. Apart from the different feelings that swelled each breast, it seemed to all as a miracle to be together again after so tragic a parting.

Berthe and Rosina knelt by the side of the little Breton, seeking what they could do to relieve his sufferings.

Pablo questioned O'Loughlin about the mustangs he was to have driven on before him.

"Nearly all of them broke away from me, Don Pablo."

"That is indeed unfortunate! They are sure to have gone back to the Indian camp."

"I know that, Don Pablo, but I couldn't do more than I did. So long as the lay of the land made them keep together, I drove them on, all right enough; but the minute we got to a big clearing that you must have crossed, say about two hours ago, away they went, helter-skelter, as if Old Nick himself was at their tails instead of me."

"Two hours ago!" repeated Bras d'Acier.

"What's best to be done?" asked Benito, who, while hating the *gambusino* in his heart as much as ever, had lately grown to obey his least instructions implicitly.

"I must examine the district. I think there are swamps, some two miles away, which it is impossible to go through."

"Then we should cross the river here, I suppose?"

"Give me the ablest of those poor horses. I must give a run as far as where I think the swamps begin. While I am away, if you have sufficient strength left, try and get all we want to make a raft."

Although broken with fatigue, the men set to work in compliance with his wishes.

Meanwhile, Berthe and Rosina saw themselves reduced to the part of helpless sympathizers by the side of their poor little friend. The very tenderest attempt at dressing one of his horrible wounds had brought on such frightful convulsions that an occasional drop of water on his parched lips was positively all they dared minister to him, lest they themselves should snap asunder the slender thread by which his life still hung.

"Yes, he did raise his eyelids, Berthe!" exclaimed Rosina, after another dose of refreshing water.

Patsy Green, who happened to pass by at the time with a huge log of wood, heard Rosina's words, and, from sheer delight, dropped his load to the ground with a loud thud.

This time Kermainguy opened his eyes wide and looked in the direction of the noise. He recognized his Irish friend, a placid smile brightened up his death-like countenance; with the same speechless satisfaction he gazed at Berthe, then at Rosina; then it seemed as though his eye wandered in search of some one else.

Providentially, Pablo returned just then from his excursion and took him by the hand. The little Breton's last wish on earth was fulfilled. Brighter and brighter grew the beam on his set features. Then like the fitful gleam of a distant light, it suddenly vanished away.

Loïc Kermainguy was no more.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOUR MEN—ONE FRIEND.

"**F**RRIENDS," said Bras d'Acier, "my heart bleeds at the thought, but we have not a moment in which to pay our last duty to this noble fellow. Push on with the raft at once, and we shall take him away with us to the island. Every instant is precious."

"Better disperse our horses in that case," suggested Vandeilles.

"By no means," replied Pablo. "First of all, we can't do without them when we get across, and, moreover, the Indians would find them in a moment. We must fasten them to the raft; they will swim after us."

"The current will carry them away, and us too, perhaps."

"It is worth a trial, any way," rejoined Benito. "If we haven't a horse to ride when we are on the other side, we shan't be much better off."

"While you finish the raft," said Pablo, "I shall ride across to the island with a long rope, fasten it round a stout tree, and bring back the other end of it."

The thing was no sooner said than done; the horses were then tied as suggested, all embarked on the raft and began

pulling away on the improvised tow-line ; all save Bras d'Acier, who remained behind to see that the rope should not be cut, perchance, before his friends had ferried themselves right across.

Nor was it a needless precaution, for hardly had they left the shore when the crackling of the branches in the neighboring wood revealed to the *gambusino* the hasty approach of an enemy.

"Make haste !" he cried, "here are the Indians !" and seizing his revolver between his teeth he loaded his rifle.

The miners clung with all their might to the rope so providentially prepared for them. But for it, the whirlpools in midstream would inevitably have sucked them away, and even with its help their utmost efforts had to be exerted to reach the shore in safety. As the last horse was being drawn to land, the hurriedly constructed raft broke into pieces and floated helplessly along the waters.

To their great relief, however, as they instinctively turned around to see what extent of water separated them from the river bank on the other side of the rock, they discovered that what had seemed to be an island was in reality the head of a peninsula connected with the mainland by a rocky dam which rose just above the water's edge, and could not on that account be perceived at a distance.

Meanwhile, Bras d'Acier had to face the Indians. He discharged his double-barreled rifle on them as soon as they came in view ; then four shots from his revolver brought down as many men. There might have been a score of them, but their arrows could hardly cope against the terrible weapons of the creole.

As soon as he felt sure that all his friends were on shore, he cut the rope and dived into the river after them. Suddenly, whether his strength had failed him, whether he had knocked his head against a rock or a floating log, or again through a cramp or a wound from an arrow, he was seen struggling like a drowning man, and an instant after, he disappeared among the reeds.

The miners uttered a cry of terror, which was answered with yells of delight by the Indians.

"Good heavens, we must save him !" exclaimed Patsy Green.

"He is dead by this time ; what can we do for him ?" remarked Benito.

"He will come up again," said Berthe, "keep a sharp watch !"

"That's no use," repeated the *capataz*; "he has been three or four minutes under water now. It is all over with him, and it would be folly to try and go to his rescue. Here are the Apaches swimming across after us. Let us think of ourselves and be off."

Whereupon he leaped on one of the horses, took up his wife and his child, much against Rosina's protestations, and disappeared at full speed.

"Come away, Berthe," said Vandeilles, endeavoring to drag away the young woman, who, pale and speechless with terror, seemed unconscious of what was going on around her. "Come away, I say !" he repeated angrily.

She passed her hand over her forehead and stared at her husband as if she had heard nothing.

Seeing she still remained riveted to the spot, the Frenchman seized her bodily, as his worthy compeer had done with Rosina, and rode off with her as fast as their horse could carry them.

Craddle and O'Loughlin remained alone.

"Here, Craddle," said Patsy, "take that horse, since they as much as left one, and go too !"

"What about you, Pat ?"

"About me !—Well, by my soul, may I never see heaven if I budge from where I am, till I see the last of Pablo ! Go, Craddle, and tell them I'll do my living best to save him if he is alive yet, or else—so help me God, I'll die by the side of him ! Hook it out of that, I tell you !"

Craddle went, though not until he had warmly grasped the hand of Pablo's faithful friend, and quickly overtook the other fugitives.

As to Patsy, he had concealed himself in the midst of a number of aquatic plants and was entirely covered by their wide leaves. Thence he spied the movements of the Apaches, quite a number of whom were diving in search of the drowned man.

At the end of two or three minutes, one of the Indians uttered a cry of joy as he lifted Bras d'Acier's head above the water. Others at once gathered around their prisoner

and disentangled his feet from the reeds that had entwined around them. He seemed quite lifeless ; his head dangled helplessly from the shoulder of the Indian who carried him up on land.

With the exception of those who had been making their way right across the river, all the savages now turned round and went back into the wood.

Almost half an hour passed by ; Patsy Green saw nothing. At the end of that time, he perceived a pirogue, manned by twelve Indians, crossing the river above him. Lying aft, among them, he could see Bras d'Acier ; and with anxious suspense he awaited their landing, to know what condition the *gambusino* was in. So far as he was able to judge, at a distance, Pablo walked ashore with a firm step, tightly bound though he was.

Two of the Indians rowed back across the river, four remained on the bank with their prisoner, and the others flew on the track of the miners.

The attention of the four guardians being divided between their charge and their departing friends, the Irishman was able to glide among the trees and draw somewhat nearer to them. He was anything but proficient, however, at this kind of work, and accordingly made but slow progress. In any case, his intention being to attack Bras d'Acier's guardians, he should necessarily wait until all the others were at a safe distance.

He had approached within a hundred paces of him when he saw the pirogue reappear. This time it carried fourteen Indians, a heavier freight than it had ever been intended for ; the least movement on the part of any of the savages save the two rowers would have capsized it. "Sure, the devil's childer have the devil's luck !" Patsy said to himself ; and feeling certain beforehand that no accident would befall them, he once more buried himself among the rushes.

Twice the pirogue went to and fro, the last time with fewer passengers. In all he thought he could reckon thirty-four savages. What would they do next ?

As soon as they had gathered together, the whole party ran off in search of the white men on horseback, leaving but two of their number with the *gambusino*. More puzzled than ever, O'Loughlin began to think "he saw double, or maybe only half" ; his hopes were doomed to be speedily crushed ;

the two Indians brought their prisoner into the pirogue and immediately rowed away with him down the stream. Away limped the Irishman along the river bank, endeavoring to keep at least within sight of the pirogue; he was so worn out with fatigue that he was unable to come right up to it before night time.

It had been dangerous to journey in the dark along a river which carries so much *débris* and presents so many natural dangers on its surface; and so the savages had halted and had fastened their skiff to a tree.

One of them landed to fetch some dead wood and cook their evening meal. Now was Patsy's opportunity. Alas! the poor fellow's exhaustion was such that he would inevitably have given the Apaches two prisoners instead of one had he attempted to move one step farther before taking breath. After a moment's rest he ventured cautiously forward. The next instant the Indian was rushing toward him with a cry of alarm. Hiding was now out of the question. With his revolver between his teeth O'Loughlin plunged into the stream and made for the pirogue. The Indian was there before him and nearly cut his left wrist through when he lifted his hand up to the edge of the boat, while the older man, who had remained on guard, would have split his skull with his *macana*, if Pablo, unable to do aught else, had not glided between his legs and tripped him up just as he struck.

In spite of his mangled wrist, Patsy had courage enough not to let go his hold of the boat, and fired at arm's length on his aggressor, who fell dead. A second shot, fired almost at random, luckily hit the older Apache and knocked him overboard. But the noise had been heard by the main body of the natives and they were making all haste toward the pirogue.

O'Loughlin's first care was to set *Bras d'Acier* free.

"Cut the mooring off, Don Pablo, and take the oars," he said hurriedly; "I'm dropping dead!"

And in very truth the poor fellow sank to the bottom of the boat.

"I cannot stir yet," answered Pablo; "look, friend, I was bound so tightly, my hands and arms are quite dead."

Patsy crawled up on his knees and began hacking the rope; at last it gave way; the Indians were barely a pistol

shot from the boat when he succeeded in shoving it off. Some dived after their prisoner, others shot a few arrows after him ; fortunately the movements of both parties were rendered uncertain by the utter darkness.

"Look out, Pablo !" exclaimed Patsy Green, "there's two of them here on the right ! For God's sake, look sharp ! One of them is laying his hand on the boat's edge, next to you !"

The Irishman had his own foe to look after, and then a second, and a third.

Pablo made a superhuman effort and with his two clenched fists crushed the fingers of the Indian. Then, electrified by the imminence of the danger, he seized the oars and rowed into midstream.

After two or three minutes he had completely recovered the use of his vigorous arms, and both he and his rescuer were at a safe distance from their pursuers.

"Where are our friends ?" he inquired.

"I believe they are going along the river side," replied Patsy ; and he availed himself of his prostrated condition to say no more about the ruffians he so heartily cursed in his inmost soul.

The wound he had received on his wrist utterly disabled him from rendering the slightest aid to the *gambusino*; the latter was therefore reduced to work, by himself, a pirogue originally intended for four rowers ; still he kept on and on, nobly plying his oars, anxious to speed on under cover of the night, despite the ever-recurring dangers which beset their course.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRONG PULL AND A LONG PULL.

MEANWHILE Craddle had overtaken Vandeilles and Benito.

On seeing him riding up by himself, Berthe and Rosina made anxious inquiries after Bras d'Acier and O'Loughlin.

Craddle related his last words with the Irishman, and how the latter had sworn he would remain at his post and rescue Pablo or die with him.

"Noble fellow!" murmured the two women, almost with one breath.

"Come, we must not stop here!" said Vandeilles. "Every minute is precious."

"So, you really mean to abandon the man to whom you owe every cent you possess?" asked Berthe, with indignation.

"That's the only thing we can do," interposed Benito. "Whether he is dead or taken prisoner, we could be of no possible use to him."

"Besides," added Vandeilles, "Pablo himself has always told us to go on without him, no matter what danger he might seem exposed to. When he is by himself he is always able to pull through."

"A very good thing, indeed, that he does not rely on you!" retorted Berthe with bitterness.

The same kind of conversation, though in a more animated style, was going on between Benito and his wife.

Driven beside herself by Benito's cowardice, Rosina showered on him such stinging reproaches as made him leap with rage.

As to Craddle, he was galloping ahead, congratulating himself on his "darned luck" at being free from all matrimonial encumbrances and baggage.

In reality, Vandeilles and Benito may not have been quite so blamable as appearances would suggest. The explanation they gave of their conduct had been borne out by more than one precedent, and Vandeilles went on repeating this to himself; but, in his heart, he was not satisfied with himself: O'Loughlin's bravery was a standing reproach for him, in his own eyes.

And thus they plodded on throughout the night.

Suddenly their wild ride was stopped short. A precipitous mountain, springing up from the river and stretching far away inland, lay right across their path.

At first they had imagined they could climb up the mountain, but they quickly perceived the futility of the attempt. Like most volcanic rocks in those parts, the side of the mountain looked as though it had been sliced off from some immense block, and offered no means of ascent even to the boldest foot-climber.

Benito struck off at right angles to the river, on a parallel,

therefore, to the mountain, while Craddle and Vandeilles alighted from their horses and went in search of a defile or pass of any kind that might enable them to get across.

After half an hour's fruitless exertions, Benito returned and found they had been equally unsuccessful. He could see no ending of the chain; and to make things worse, it seemed to describe a kind of semicircle, in which they would be caught as in a trap. Two alternatives presented themselves to them: either following the foot of the mountain, a course which would bring them back to the Indians, who no doubt were well acquainted with this natural barrier; or crossing the river, which in this place was very wide and exceedingly rapid.

One expedient was as impracticable as the other; even in the unlikely event of its being possible to cross the river on a raft, they had neither the wood, nor the ropes, nor, above all, the time necessary for its construction.

"Hell itself is against us!" shouted Vandeilles. "We are done for!—Absolutely nothing left for us to do but to sit down and await death, or, better still, to shoot one another, so as to escape the tortures of those cursed redskins!"

Benito raved and jumped about like a maniac. Now he would blaspheme against all the saints in heaven, then he promised them the costliest offerings. Lastly, yielding to that innate want, experienced by man, of laying the blame of his ill-fortune on somebody, he charged Vandeilles with their present plight, and bitterly reproached him with his obstinacy in keeping close to the river side.

A quarrel, the twentieth at least within the past month, was once more on the point of breaking out between the two impassioned creatures when Craddle called out:

"Do stop your row! I hear a noise on the river."

In an instant, they all had crouched behind bushes.

Presently a pirogue darted past, like an arrow, along the foaming waters, within a pistol-shot of the bank; and at the same time Pablo's favorite signal of his return to camp, the thrice-repeated cry of the jackal, was heard through the night.

"It is Pablo!" ejaculated Berthe and Rosina at the same time.

"Can't be," grumbled Benito.

"I tell you it is Mr. de Verrières," repeated Berthe; "will none of you answer his signal?"

"If they be Indians, as is far more likely?"

"No such thing, I am sure it was Don Pablo's cry," affirmed Rosina.

"The Indians may have imitated it," rejoined Vandeilles.

"It was his voice, I am certain of it!" reiterated Berthe, and the word "Cowards!" broke from her quivering lips, immediately followed by a loud cry of "Bras d'Acier!"

"You imprudent woman!" gasped Vandeilles, closing her mouth with his hand.

The splashing of the oars and the gurgling of the tide against the prow soon announced the return of the pirogue. The signal was repeated.

This time Vandeilles himself was the first to answer it.

Two minutes later, Bras d'Acier was in the midst of his friends, beset with trembling inquiries about his miraculous escape.

"The devils are after us still!" cried Patsy Green, as an arrow grazed his cheek.

"Quick, all to the pirogue, friends!" said Pablo; "quick!"

Benito was, of course, the first to run away; but his matchless superiority in this respect proved useful in this case. One of the Indians, fleeter-footed than the rest, was already trying to unmoor the boat when the *capataz* reached the spot and planted his navaja in the middle of his back.

The whole party embarked hastily. Then Vandeilles, Benito, Craddle, and O'Loughlin (the hero of the night) took one oar each, while Pablo stood aft with another to scull and guide them.

Their pursuers being compelled to give up the chase, they were able to devote all their attention to the many dangers on their watery path, and pushed on for the remainder of the night, that is to say, for some three hours longer.

At sunrise, they found themselves close to a high hill, apparently easy of access. Pablo and Benito landed in order to survey the country around. Whether the Indians had retraced their steps, or were now far behind the fugitives, the *gambusino* and his companion were unable to discover anything of a nature to give them the least uneasiness.

Around them stretched vast prairies, intersected here and there with small clumps of trees.

The rowers now took a little rest from their long-continued toil. It was time : their stiffened fingers could barely retain hold of their oars. O'Loughlin had at first rejoiced at the thought that his old mother (the Lord have mercy on her soul !) could not now call him a "left-handed kittogue," seeing he could only use his right hand ; but he had soon acquired the conviction that one hand on each side was better than no left hand at all, after all.

Craddle heaved a sigh at the provisions, now reduced to a few pieces of hard biscuit and some handfuls of corn flour. After partaking of which, wearied nature asserted her claim to a few moments' repose.

Ever suspicious of Indian cunning, and afraid lest his sentinel, however watchful, should let himself be ensnared in any way, Pablo aroused his companions after a couple of hours, and they resumed their flight. This time, however, two men only rowed at one time, while the others slept at the bottom of the pirogue.

A kind of couch was made with zarapes at the back of the boat, on which Berthe and Rosina lay in turns. Later on, as the rays of the sun grew warmer, another zarape was hung over the couch by Bras d'Acier ; and thus, with intervals of labor and of rest, the day passed uneventfully by.

A couple of hours before sunset, a herd of bisons came for a drink to a creek just in sight of the pirogue. Running ashore and securing one of the welcome visitors was for Bras d'Acier and Craddle the work of half an hour.

Whereupon, there being now no fear of any immediate attack on the part of the Indians, a general landing was agreed upon ; forthwith a fire was lit, and for the first time, after three days of untold anguish, fatigues, and privations, the poor travelers enjoyed a meal which restored to them some courage and strength.

"I do think our greatest dangers are over now," said Bras d'Acier. "We are going to moor our pirogue securely and have a whole night's rest. Beyond the rock you see yonder, about three hundred yards off, we shall not be able to follow the river any longer. So, to-morrow, we shall resume our overland journey ; and in two or three days, I hope, we

shall fall into the track usually followed by the miners on their way from Fort Sutter to the gold districts."

"Suppose we pushed on as far as that rock this very evening," suggested Vandeilles.

"No," replied Pablo. "First, you all need rest."

"You personally do not, of course," interrupted Berthe.

"Not yet," said Pablo with his soft, sad smile. "Not for a few days more. Moreover," he continued, "if by chance we are attacked, we should not be so advantageously situated yonder as we are here to defend ourselves."

Their night's rest was undisturbed. They were told afterward by other miners that the Apaches had given up their chase after them to go in search of the other Indians who had made their way into the grotto by the Valley del Desierto.

The latter were horse thieves, like the first savages who had attacked the camp on the plateau. Less numerous and much less warlike than the Apaches, they had taken to flight on the approach of their enemies, but had been overtaken and slaughtered almost to a man.

Meanwhile the party followed Bras d'Acier's guidance through endless prairies.

On the evening of their fifth day's march they fell in with a caravan of twenty-two gold-seekers, on their way to the mines.

Several of them knew Bras d'Acier by sight and ran up to him, entreating him to indicate some good placer to them.

"I will," he answered; "but this time I have to ask for a reward."

"What is it?" shouted the gold-seekers, with one voice.

"You have several wagons and a large number of horses, oxen, and mules. You are going to make over to us one of your wagons with eight oxen and six horses. I shall pay you double what they cost you at Fort Sutter; and if you cannot possibly do without them, I pledge myself to have them brought to you as soon as we reach San Francisco. In return for this I shall tell you the way to the plateau we are now coming from.

The proposal was accepted with shouts of delight.

Such was Bras d'Acier's renown that, had he asked for every one of their horses in payment of his information, the poor fellows would have gladly agreed to his terms.

The two caravans had supper together around an enormous fire and the evening was pleasantly spent, some relating their past experiences, others telling of their prospective schemes. Next morning, at daybreak, each went off in opposite directions and soon lost sight of each other.

CHAPTER XXXI.

“THE SQUARING-UP OF VARIOUS AND SUNDRY ACCOUNTS.”

THANKS to the improved means of locomotion now at their disposal, Bras d'Acier and his companions henceforth made rapid progress. Soon they found themselves in frequented districts; and from this time forward their only source of alarm sprang from their own race of men, for no Indians ever crossed their path now save those of friendly tribes.

Despite the very long stages, they rode without a break, and all their former health and strength gradually returned to them. Forsooth, what was this kind of fatigue as compared with the life they had just led?

And now the end of all this toiling was almost within sight. Benito, Craddle, and O'Loughlin freely talked of what they would do “by and by.” Still it had been easy to see that there was many a dark speck in the fitful sunshine that brightened their progress.

Patsy Green revered Bras d'Acier as a kind of demi-god. It would be “the devil and all” to part with him, or for that matter with Madame Vandeilles. Benito had announced his intention of sojourning for a while at San Francisco, much to the regret of Rosina, who dreaded the influence of that town for him. Selfish Craddle, was perhaps the only member of the party who looked perfectly happy and contented, although he experienced toward the *gambusino* and the “little lady” a kind of feeling of which he “guessed” he never had thought himself capable.

As to Pablo, who could have pierced the veil or mystery with which his future plans, as well as his present musings, were shrouded?

For three long years he had pursued one fixed object.

That object gained, his task fulfilled, and fulfilled in a manner as worthy of the man as of the hero, what more in accordance with certain episodes in his past career than the possibility of his sudden disappearance, when he had safely conducted his friends within sight of San Francisco?

The surmise had flashed across Berthe's mind; but against this there was the objection that his presence was necessary at the final distribution of the proceeds of the undertaking.

Other and more likely fears forever loomed in the distance before the poor woman's eyes. She thought, or rather she continually shrank from the thought, of the day when her husband and herself would take leave of their benefactor.

So often already had her husband repaid his unheard-of devotion with coarse affront! What last insult might not now, perhaps, crown the cup of his ingratitude!

Nor was Vandeilles a stranger, evidently, to the remembrance of his indebtedness.

Whether under pressure of that consideration, whether already under the influence of the baneful atmosphere he was fast returning to, the Vandeilles so well known in the worst haunts of San Francisco was gradually reasserting himself.

He frequently would break out into his former fits of rage, and if at such times the thought of Pablo crossed his mind, there welled up from the darker recesses of his soul a morbid regret for some wrong deed that had not been done, some evil word that had been unspoken, a something that might, surely not justify, but even palliate a rupture between him and Bras d'Acier.

At other times, he would make an attempt at lessening in his own eyes the real magnitude of the *gambusino's* devotion; and foiled by his own sense of truth, he found nothing in his vitiated heart but a feeling of anger against that very nobleness beneath which he felt himself crushed.

One afternoon, from the summit of a little hill, the houses of San Francisco became visible for the first time, and without any previous agreement, a halt was made as though instinctively.

Berthe was walking by Rosina, and grasped her hand as if to blend their thoughts and their regrets in silent com-

munion. Rosina nestled her head on her friend's bosom, and in spite of their efforts to repress their feelings, both burst out crying.

"The devil take the women and their whining!" cried Vandeilles, furious. "So long as there was danger ahead, there was not a tear in their eyes; now that we have pulled through all right, there they are sobbing and blubbering!"

Benito did not need so many words to arouse him; he dragged his wife aside by the arm, and with set teeth and foaming lips, reproached her with crying for Bras d'Acier. She listened without replying a single word, and when the torrent of abuse had ceased, she straightway returned to the only woman who knew of her sorrows and could sympathize with her.

"You pity me, I am sure, Berthe," she said; "but console yourself, dear; something tells me I have not much longer to suffer. My mother has a kind heart—and in spite of all, I do think she will take compassion on my little orphan and take my place with him."

"Take your place, Rosina? You surely do not mean to abandon him!"

"Not till my last breath, Berthe; but I have a presentiment that I am not to live much longer."

"What an idea! Do drive away all such fears."

"Such fears," did you say? God is a witness to me, Berthe, that, were it not for my child, death would be my most ardent desire!"

Poor Berthe poured forth into the broken heart of her little friend all the consolation that her own aching heart could suggest.

Two hours later the miners had reached the outskirts of San Francisco.

Craddle suggested that they should alight at the same hotel, a proposal which Vandeilles and Benito instantly objected to; but the Yankee insisted that they should, of necessity, be all under the same roof, were it but for one night, for the "squaring up of various and sundry accounts in which no citizen in this enlightened country felt a greater interest than himself."

Craddle scored one more point, and the whole party alighted at Graham's Hotel.

For the last time they dined together. On the whole, a

certain element of sadness pervaded the gathering, notwithstanding the boisterous hilarity of Craddle and O'Loughlin, who were renewing acquaintance, somewhat too freely perhaps, with certain long-lost spirituous friends.

At the close of the meal, the American stood up as erect as circumstances permitted, and proposed the toast of "Bras d'Acier, the organizer, the chief, and the savior of this expedition."

"No, friends," interrupted Pablo, "before and above everything else, we all have a more solemn duty to perform. Let us drink to the memory of the companions we have lost, of Mundiaz, of José, of Ribonneau, and let us give a special remembrance to the noble lad who freely gave his life so as to save ours—I mean brave Loïc Kermainguy."

The glasses clinked against each other, and a mournful silence reigned for some time in the banqueting-room.

In the midst of the ceaseless dangers they had to face, and of the toil they had to endure day by day, scarcely had the miners cast a thought on those who were so suddenly snatched away from among them. Now that they were in peace and safety, the fate of the departed ones, a fate which might have been their own, appealed more forcibly to their softer feelings.

The men turned away from their bottles and glasses; the two women wept.

Bras d'Acier availed himself of this moment, when their hearts were likely to be somewhat less selfishly inclined, to speak of the distributing of the proceeds, and of the share allotted to the families of their late companions.

Scales were called for; the doors were carefully bolted; and when each man had seen that his revolver or pistols were ready for use, the beltfuls of gold were emptied out on the table.

"First of all," said Bras d'Acier, "we have to put aside the \$2300 due to the child of José Guerino; I undertake to forward them. A like sum, due to the heirs of Mundiaz, will have to be handed over on their behalf to the Mexican consul in this town. The two shares that would have fallen to Ribonneau and Domingo have been rendered available by their death—"

"And can be divided among us," interrupted Craddle and Benito.

"By no means," firmly answered Pablo. "They shall be devoted to the payment of the sacred debt we all contracted toward poor little Loïc. The two shares will just make up the 70,000 francs he was so anxious to gain for the Marquis de Tregastel, and a surplus of 12,000 francs for his old people at home."

With incredible effrontery Benito opened his lips to protest against this arrangement.

"Not a word!" cried Bras d'Acier, with a crushing gesture of loathing indignation. "Do not disgrace us by raising even a discussion on such a subject."

Vandeilles's share amounted to \$60,000, that of each of the other miners to over \$8000.

"Well, but won't you keep a single farthing to bless your own self with, Don Pablo?" asked the Irishman.

"No, my friend," he replied. "My wants are few, and the nuggets I pick up in my wanderings are quite enough for me. It is probable I shall soon set off on another expedition. Once I am out of the towns, you know, my carbine and my machete will supply me with all I need."

The words created a strange feeling of sadness in the listeners.

Even Vandeilles was moved, and stood up to hold out his hand to the self-denying dispenser of all this wealth.

But no, his hand hung idly by his side; whatever utterances sought to pass his lips were stifled ere they reached them.

"Well," he said, by way of accounting for his abrupt rising up, "now that everything is arranged, we have only to say good-by. For my part, I am nodding with sleep already, and I own I feel quite happy to think I shall sleep on a real bed to-night."

"Do not go away," said Pablo, turning to the other miners, "under the impression that I am forgetting my promise about a second placer."

"No fear," answered Craddle, "it's a long time since we've chalked you up a good many sizes above that, Bras d'Acier. But I reckon a little rest and quiet, in clover like, would not do my Irish colt here or myself any harm."

"I want to be in that next lot, too," exclaimed Benito.

"Why should the crittur be in that swim?" cried Craddle

indignantly, "we hadn't set eyes on him yet, when you gave us that promise, Pablo."

Loud words ensued, and a fight was of course imminent, when Pablo decided that, as Benito had shared the dangers of the first expedition, it was but fair to let him join the second if he claimed the right to do so.

The question being thus settled, the disputants and their umpire separated.

As to Vandeilles, he had dragged his wife away while the angry debate was going on.

In truth, every moment he remained there seemed an age to him. The confused sense of his guilt exasperated him. His unfortunate wife was soon made acquainted with the fact; for on reaching the door of her apartment, she was pushed into the room with such violence that she staggered and well-nigh fell to the ground.

This unprovoked brutality was too much even for Vandeilles. He was ashamed of himself. Apologize to a woman—to his wife? Yielding so far to a sense of shame would have been an additional disgrace. He did not even think of it. He would take himself away and not return until she was asleep.

"I am going out!" he said abruptly.

And out he went, not knowing exactly in what direction to wander at such an hour of the night.

"By the way," he mused to himself, when he found himself in the street, "it is now three months since I handled a card. Who knows but I might have luck now! That's always the case after a long break. Besides, I won't play more than a thousand dollars. And if I lose, I'll come home immediately."

When he did come home, it was morning; he had lost two thousand dollars.

He had found out, he said to his wife, that there would be no boat sailing for France before a fortnight at least; and, so as to draw as little as possible on their fortune, they should remove at once to a cheaper hotel.

On that same day, Benito and Rosina left Graham's Hotel for a Mexican lodging-house at the other extremity of the city; and the *capataz*, who was as inveterate a gambler as Vandeilles, at once began his round of all the disreputable houses in San Francisco.

Craddle and O'Loughlin alone remained under the same roof as Pablo, intending to quietly enjoy "their clover."

The very next afternoon, a man was seen sinking helplessly to the ground, just as he stepped into the hall at Graham's Hotel. It was Bras d'Acier. Word was sent to Patsy and Craddle. In all haste they took him to the very nearest room; and there he lay, to all appearance, lifeless.

During the first years after the discovery of the mines, the greatest politician, the most influential minister of any state, the most renowned *savant* might have stayed any length of time in San Francisco without exciting the least curiosity. His very presence might have passed altogether unnoticed.

Bras d'Acier was perhaps the only man in whose acts and movements the slightest interest was shown. There was hardly a gold-seeker, who, even on his first tramp out, had not heard of the famous *gambusino*, of his prodigies of skill and bravery, of his generosity, and of the many services he had gratuitously rendered.

Needless to say that, by dint of being repeated, the tale of his exploits grew apace; and such a man who had brought home fifty pounds of gold from a placer indicated to him by Pablo, was popularly quoted as having found at least five times that amount.

The Vandeilles expedition had lately aroused public attention, and for the past twenty-four hours there was nothing gossiped about but the immense treasures found by the *gambusino's* lucky companions.

The news of his sudden death spread over the town, therefore, like wild fire; in less than an hour, over fifty miners had flocked to the hotel to inquire after him.

Extraordinarily gifted as was his constitution, the unheard of fatigues he had endured were in truth above the powers of man; sooner or later the o'erstrained steel should snap.

For two hours, his friends could evoke no sign of life from him. At last, however, he had recovered his senses; and he now lay, resting on the invalid chair which the owner of the house had hastened to procure for him, so that he should not be put even to the trouble of being removed from the room into which he had been conveyed out of the hall.

Few, indeed, were the customers, if there was a single

one, to whom such attentions would have been paid by any hotel-keeper in San Francisco ; but in truth, the presence of Pablo was a fortune to "the boss at Graham's," and any price was offered him for a room under his roof, in the hope of picking up acquaintance with the renowned *gambusino*.

Meanwhile the stream of callers kept on flowing in and out, and their loud voices easily reached Bras d'Acier. The word "death" frequently struck his ear. It seemed as though, with many, the question was, not how he was, but how many hours he had been dead.

"Do you know what you should do, Patsy?" he said to the Irishman, who had driven everybody else out of the room. "There is evidently a rumor that I am dead ; you ought to run to Madame Vandeilles and la Señora Rosina, and tell them that I have had a mere fainting fit, but that I am all right. As you go out, make a show of closing the door carefully ; nobody will disturb me till you come back."

O'Loughlin was off in an instant.

It was not long ere a whispered conversation took place in the corridor:

"He is better," the hall-keeper said, "but he must not be bothered ; that Irishman of his sent us all 'to blazes,' a minute ago for talking aloud. What's your name?"

"Oh, it is not me ; I don't know the man," answered a woman's voice, quite unknown to the invalid listener ; "I was only sent to know how he was ; if you give him this, it'll be all right."

A card was then slipped under the door and the interlocutors apparently walked away.

The card simply bore the words : "*Two anxious friends, hearing of your sudden illness, send kindest inquiries.*"

Pablo had scarce gone back to his arm-chair after reading this message, which was so much in sympathy with O'Loughlin's errand, when the door was burst open.

"Why, Mr. Vandeilles ! What can be the matter?" asked Bras d'Acier.

"The matter, eh ? The matter ? I want my wife, that's all !"

"What do you mean ?"

"I mean that I was talking with Davis just round the corner. I saw a young woman, wrapped in a black scarf, sneaking out of the hotel. That was Rosina, of course !

And as Rosina and Berthe have been together all day—Come, I am not a fool! Where is my wife?”

“I have seen neither la Señora Rosina nor—”

“Oh, I am not a man to be put off in that manner,” interrupted the infuriated Frenchman. “My wife is concealed here somewhere. By heaven, that portière! What a good hiding place!”

The creole's blood boiled with indignation; he caught Vandeilles's arm, as the latter stepped toward a closet at the other end of the room.

“Vandeilles!” he exclaimed, “this room is mine, and I am prostrated with loss of blood. If you dare lay your hand on those curtains, I hold you for a wretch and a coward!”

“For anything you may choose!” yelled Vandeilles, and, as he struggled away from the *gambusino's* weakened grasp, his hand, unintentionally perhaps, touched his cheek.

Like a flash of lightning, Pablo's outstretched hand struck him full in the face.

The Frenchman, whose teeth now chattered with rage, ascertained at a glance that the closet was positively empty.

“Very well, very well!” he repeated, “I was mistaken; but you slapped me in the face, Don Pablo. Just now you can't fight—but you've slapped me—yes, slapped me—in the face! Just wait till you are on your feet!”

And he slammed the door almost off its hinges behind him as he bounded out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BLOOD-RED SKY AT THE CLOSE OF THE DAY.

THE perspective of a duel with Bras d'Acier looked singularly attractive to Vandeilles, save for one drawback.

A lingering shred of regard for public opinion made him feel that before encountering him he should first clear himself of the money debt he owed him.

On the other hand, giving up his hard-earned fortune, just as he was about enjoying its possession, was a sacrifice altogether above his strength.

Goaded by these conflicting thoughts, he hit upon a plan but too much in accordance with his gambling proclivities.

He unfortunately happened to have a large number of his nuggets about him, having stated to his wife his intention of bringing them to a changer. Instead of an exchange office he straightway made for a gambling den.

"If I win," the unfortunate fellow said to himself, "I shall give him back all the gold I got through him. Then I can fight him without a word of comment from any one. If I lose—well, I won't have anything belonging to him then; and I can fight him in that case, too."

In an hour's time he had lost \$25,000.

Furious at what he called the obstinacy of his evil genius, he left the table for a few minutes. Who knows? Luck might have turned by the time he would come back. As he was sipping his absinthe at the bar, Benito came and called for his favorite glass of refino.

The deepest mutual aversion existed in these two men. Vandeilles's vanity was wounded by the familiarity affected toward him by the half-breed, who would fain treat him before the public as a comrade, although his old hatred of him was as rife as ever.

As fatality would have it, both had just experienced considerable losses, and their irascible temper was none the better for their ill luck.

"Well, Vandeilles, old fellow, how do you get on?" asked Benito.

"I am losing," was the dry answer.

"How much?"

"Don't know."

"*Caramba!* You are so rich, you are! I am losing too—just dropped 500 piastres at least!"

Vandeilles shrugged his shoulders with princely disdain.

"Oh, I know very well, that for you, 500 piastres are not much!" said Benito, stung to the quick by the manner of the Frenchman. "But I have not a *gambusino* sufficiently interested in me or in mine to put \$60,000 in my way for the pleasure of the thing!"

"You might have better luck with a half-bred *gambusino!*"

"You think so?" hissed the *capataz*, turning pale at this insult, than which no greater could be flung at him.

"I think so. Bras d'Acier has none but noble, pure blood in his veins. It is quite natural he should look after his own countrymen before thinking of the offspring of Indian squaws and white adventurers!"

The pallor on Benito's face assumed a greenish hue. At this juncture a Mexican, who had been lounging about Graham's Hotel when Vandeilles came out of Bras d'Acier's room like a maniac, whispered a few words in his ear.

The latter laughed a sardonic laugh and answered something in Spanish which the Frenchman could not make out, but which sent a titter round the room, evidently at his expense.

"What did you say?" he cried, stepping down to the *capataz*. "Repeat it in my hearing, if you dare."

"I said that a sum of \$60,000 was very fine, no doubt; but that it must be rather unhandy-like, when a man wants his wife, to have to go hunt her up in another fellow's apartments!"

An outburst of coarse laughter greeted this remark.

"That's, no doubt, why you stop here all day and quietly leave your own wife with Bras d'Acier!"

"Rosina with Bras d'Acier! You are a liar!"

"I, a liar! You son of a coyote!" shouted Vandeilles, grasping his machete.

Benito had drawn his navaja, and stood on the defensive.

"Go on, Benito!" cried a few Mexicans; "keep up the honor of the country."

"Come, Vandeilles," said a group of Americans in their turn, "teach that white-washed coon a lesson!"

The two antagonists needed no stimulus. They struck at each other furiously; their thrusts succeeded each other with incredible rapidity.

Vandeilles's fame as a sword duelist had long since been established, and Benito could not have contended against his close fencing, had he been obliged to stand his ground; but thanks to his bodily agility he managed to escape such blows as he was unable to parry with his weapon. Now he would stoop and crouch almost to the ground like a tiger cat on the spring; now he would bound up on Vandeilles, strike at him at haphazard, and throw himself back before the Frenchman had time to answer.

In spite of the suppleness of the *capataz*, however, the advantage was always with his antagonist in the end.

Benito had already received several wounds; he saw he could not hold out much longer, and gathering all his strength he made a desperate rush forward. Vandeilles parried off so violently that he knocked his adversary's machete out of his hand.

Maddened with rage, Benito snatched a revolver, which one of his countrymen slipped furtively into his hand, and fired twice without stopping.

Vandeilles, struck full in the chest, staggered, reeled upon himself, and fell.

All the spectators moved toward him. In the tumult and confusion Benito rushed out.

It was no thought of the murder he had just committed that was the cause of his disappearance.

There were still four bullets in the fatal revolver, and with it in his hand he was making straight for Graham's Hotel.

His exasperation, the promptings of his jealousy, the madding spell of spilled blood, gave him the appearance of a foaming wild beast rather than that of a man.

His wife, rendered uneasy by his prolonged absence from home, had ventured out to ascertain if possible that nothing wrong had befallen him.

At the turn of a neighboring street she caught sight of him; his very gait alarmed her; she flew after him with an anxiety the wretch little deserved and barely overtook him as he entered the hotel.

Benito mechanically turned round to see what obstacle prevented him pushing the door behind him, and perceived her by his side. Then—there was a shot, a piercing cry—and in another second, Benito had three repeated times stained his navaja with the heart's blood of poor Rosina.

A rush was made for him by the appalled hotel attendants, but he sprang to his feet like a tiger at bay and leveled his murderous weapon at them; and in that attitude he was stepping backward toward the street, when, like a specter, Bras d'Acier appeared at the other end of the hall.

"Rosina!" he ejaculated, running toward the young woman.

"She is dead," a by-stander said to him.

The *capataz*, the reader knows, had no lack of bravery, and his present condition still increased his habitual courage. Yet he shuddered as he met the gaze of Bras d'Acier. An unknown terror took possession of him and he turned round to flee, but by this time the door had been locked.

"Clear the way all of you!" thundered Bras d'Acier.

All obeyed. Benito and he thus found themselves face to face at a distance of eight or ten paces at most. Standing on the two steps which led from the hall into the corridor, he dominated the scene. Benito stood with his back against the street door, his machete in his left hand and his revolver in his right. A cloud of blood veiled his sight. It looked as though Pablo's glance fascinated him. A death-like silence reigned in the room. Each man held his breath and felt his heart oppressed with unspeakable anguish.

The *capataz* saw Bras d'Acier moving to step down; with a hurried wipe of his hand over his eyes he took aim and fired. The sound of the shot was still resounding when Benito rolled lifeless to the ground.

With one mighty spring, Bras d'Acier had lighted upon the murderer and buried his poniard in his breast.

The blow has remained famous in the annals of San Francisco. It had been struck with such force and precision that not only had the blade entirely disappeared from sight, but the very hilt had dug its impress deep into Benito's mangled breast.

He fell like a man struck by lightning.

The next instant Bras d'Acier had run to Rosina, and taking her in his arms had brought her into the nearest private room, his own. Despite their curiosity, none of the spectators dared to follow him, none save Patsy Green, who had just returned with Rosina's little boy. He had found the child crying bitterly for his mother and had taken him with him.

Rosina was still breathing, but could not speak.

On perceiving her child, she raised her eye toward Bras d'Acier with a heart-rending look of appeal.

"Rosina, this child is mine from this moment forth," he said, and his emotion would not permit him another word.

A convulsive shiver agitated her frame. Patsy held up the child to her that she might kiss him. A minute later, poor Rosina's sufferings were over.

And now O'Loughlin drew Bras d'Acier aside.

"Don Pablo," he began, "don't be startled, will you? Vandeilles is dead!"

"Dead!"

"As dead as a herring. It was Benito did it!"

"How? Why?"

"There's Williams, that was by at the fight; he'll tell you about it better than I could!"

Pablo went to the man who was pointed out to him in the corridor and heard from him the details of the duel and its tragic ending.

"What did they do with Vandeilles?" he asked.

"We carried him home," replied the man. "There was nobody at his lodgings. Anyway, he was quite dead."

Was it a frightful dream? Was Pablo's o'erstrung brain placing before his bodily eyes the visions of his fears? No, it was really Berthe who suddenly appeared in yonder half-open door and uttered that cry of terror.

On leaving Rosina, with whom she had spent the day, she, too, had become uneasy about her husband. Vague rumors had soon reached her ears of gamblers losing considerable sums of money, of a fight between a Frenchman and a Mexican, of revolver-shooting at Graham's Hotel; she had made her way to the latter, the only one she knew of the several places she heard mentioned; and as she entered, one of those ubiquitous busy-bodies had told her abruptly that the corpse of Vandeilles had been fetched home an hour ago.

"Patsy, Patsy, run to her help!" gasped Bras d'Acier, and, so saying, he dropped once more into the arms of some by-standers.

When, hours after, they succeeded in bringing him to life again, he was a prey to a terrible attack of fever.

For more than a month he was delirious, and at frequent intervals he would fall in such violent fits that it took eight or ten men to hold him and keep him from throwing himself out of his window.

At length, however, relief came both to him and to Berthe; for she, too, had been stricken down by her sorrows and sufferings.

Need the denouement of this story be told at great length?

At the expiration of her mourning, Berthe married the man who had given her such proofs of his devotion.

They left a country so full of cruel memories for them and started for Havana, where they are now living.

Rosina's little boy, between whom and their own children no difference is made, will be a wealthy man one day; for they would not touch the \$35,000 which Vandailles still had at the time of his death, and invested the sum in the child's name.

Patsy Green has given up all thought of ever returning to the placers and lives with Bras d'Acier. He is a great favorite with the children and delights them with marvelous tales of the *gambusino's* exploits.

Lastly, to omit nobody, Craddle amassed an enormous fortune in California and is now residing in the vicinity of New York, the unconcerned spectator of events and things.

Every two years he pays a visit to Mr. and Mrs. de Verrières, "the only two critturs on this planet," he avers, "that he would disturb his thinking tank about."

THE END.

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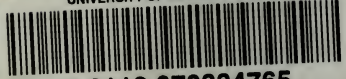
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